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Illustrator • Riv

6

*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*

Twilight Overture

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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Twilight Overture



"SURE."

"...AH, THAT
UNDERWEAR'S
MADE BY THE
RICCA GUILD,
ISN'T IT? CAN
I FEEL IT?"





**"CLEAN
THEM UP
QUICKLY. I'M
COUNTING
ON YOU,"**

**"...UNDER-
STOOD.
I WILL
RETURN
SHORTLY."**

Liselotte said, smiling innocently as she started to heal. In return, Aria's mouth twitched with a smile as she let out a huff of laughter, before she bowed once and ran off at a near-inhuman speed.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

OTHER WORLDERS

SPIRIT FOLK VILLAGE



Sara
Silver Werewolf Girl



Orphia
High Elf Girl



Alma
Elder Dwarf Girl



Arslan
Werelion Boy



Vera
Silver Werewolf Girl & Sara's Sister



Dryas
High Class Spirit of the Spirit Folk Village



Celia Claire
Daughter of a Count and Rio's former academy teacher. On the verge of an undesirable political marriage.



Latifa
Werewolf Girl & Former Slave. Reincarnated from another world and fondly calls Rio "Onii-chan."



Liselotte Cretia
Daughter of a Duke & President of the Ricca Guild



Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum



Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum



Rio

A boy reincarnated into another world with the memories from his previous life. His current priority is to secure Mihar, Aki, and Masato's safety.



Amakawa Haruto

A young man who was Rio's previous life as a Japanese university student. Mihar's childhood friend and Aki's half brother.



Aishia

The contracted spirit that was sleeping within Rio. Is apparently an upper high class spirit, but has no memories.



Ayase Mihar

Haruto's childhood friend and first love. Doesn't know that her savior Rio is the reincarnation of Haruto.



Sakata Hiroaki

Young man summoned from another world as a hero.



Sendo Aki

Haruto's half sister and Masato's stepsister.



Sendo Masato

Bright and honest stepbrother of Aki.

KINGDOM OF GALARC

KINGDOM OF BELTRUM

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Prologue: Target

In the Kingdom of Beltrum, inside the capital of Beltrant...

The wedding ceremony between Charles Arbor, eldest son of the Duke Arbor family, and Celia Claire, daughter to the Count Claire family, was suspended.

After having his bride kidnapped, Charles met with Reiss, the Proxia Empire ambassador, in the drawing room of his estate. Reiss was clad in formal dress, its subdued coloring conforming to that of a military uniform.

He sat down on the sofa opposite to Charles. "What a terrible misfortune this has been. You must be most pained to have your beloved fiancée abducted like this. As a long time friend, I'd like to express my deepest sympathies for your woes," Reiss consoled in a low and calm voice.

Meanwhile, a somewhat panicked expression flickered over Charles' face. "I- Indeed. I am most grateful for your kind words. It fills me with shame to have you come all the way to our kingdom only to be subject to such a spectacle— I fear that this incident may have caused inconvenience to the Proxia Empire..." he said, watching Reiss' expression.

"Unfortunately, that is correct," Reiss agreed without mincing words. "At present, the situation is terribly regrettable from the viewpoint of the Proxia Empire too. The current Beltrum monarchy led by the Duke Arbor faction must always be at its best, after all. Surely the negative impact to your country in this incident cannot be overlooked, don't you think?" There had to be a considerable number of nobles in the capital that secretly held antipathy towards Duke Arbor's faction, and he was asking if they could be silenced.

"...There is no need for you to worry about that. The current capital has no opposing nobility with any power." Despite nearly tripping over his words, Charles managed to reply calmly. "In that case, all is well. But there has been movement from the Huguenot faction to create ties with the Galarc Kingdom. There will be trouble if the rebels left and drifted that way instead, yes? For the current Beltrum monarchy to be weakened any further," Reiss said in a

somewhat dubious tone.

“Of course, I am aware of that.” Charles nodded with great vigor, his voice squeaking in a strange manner.

“That is wonderful to hear. If the alliance annulment between Beltrum and Galarc were to be taken off the table, then it is possible my kingdom would back out of the friendship treaty,” Reiss said nonchalantly.

“T-That would be a problem! That isn’t what we agreed on. We have already started to distance ourselves from the Galarc Kingdom, as we negotiated. There is no way we can compromise at this late stage!” Charles objected, suddenly taken aback.

“That is why I am saying that the Duke Arbor regime must maintain a tight grip of the reins on the Beltrum monarchy... at all costs. I’m counting on you. There’s no turning back at this point.”

It is because of you Arbor factionists that the Kingdom of Beltrum is like this, after all... Reiss added in his mind, a cold sneer lingering on his mouth.

“Guh... B-But of course. This much will be of no concern.” Charles was rendered speechless for a moment, then agreed in a panicked voice as though he was trying to convince himself. After finally making a comeback when it came to his own honor, he couldn’t afford to stumble here.

Reiss appeared satisfied for a moment. “How reliable to hear. That will allow me some peace of mind. But, that aside... Are you taking any actions to solve the kidnapping case of your bride?” he suddenly inquired. “...In the name of the Kingdom, the perpetrator has been eliminated. However, as you know, Celia’s whereabouts cannot be determined at this moment in time. The perpetrator most likely had a hidden accomplice who took her away. My subordinates have sealed all the roads in the residential outskirts near the capital and are searching every nook and cranny, but...” Charles grimaced with a bitter expression as he offered somewhat useless information.

“Oh? Eliminated, you say? I only saw him from afar, but he seemed to be quite the skilled individual... My, my, how splendid indeed.” Reiss widened his eyes exaggeratedly.

“...He was indeed a handful to deal with. But according to the report, the man was struck by a single blow from Alfred of the Royal Guard and was blown apart, leaving no remains. A fitting fate for a bandit.” With no corpse to be confirmed, it would have been more correct to say his status was unknown, but Charles exaggerated the facts without hiding his disdain.

“Is that so... If the renowned strongest of the Beltrum Kingdom—the *King’s Sword*—took him on, then your conclusion makes sense. How unfortunate for that bandit... No, it was a reckless attempt to begin with.” Reiss nodded contemplatively.

He probably just concealed his whereabouts well. After the commotion, the powerful spirit aura disappeared outside the capital. It seems reasonable to assume that the spirit materialized and took the bride away. The bandit was most likely a powerful spirit arts user, too. Why, the whole thing is so daring, it could even be called a work of art... Reiss analyzed quietly in his heart, contrary to his spoken words.

“...Truly, there should be a limit to how reckless, foolish, and shameless one can be. How despicable...” Charles fumed with gritted teeth, tone dripping with deep-set hatred.

Even with the perpetrator dead, as long as Celia was missing, Charles and the Duke Arbor family would remain in a state of shame. He was trying to remain collected in front of Reiss, but he was seething with rage underneath the surface.

Reiss could see clearly through Charles’ current state of mind and condition. *I don’t know what the bandit was aiming for by abducting the bride, but it wouldn’t be good to have only the Beltrum Kingdom continue to suffer blow after blow. It would be best if the Duke Huguenot faction could cause some significant damage to the Galarc side... Goodness, this man is a handful to deal with indeed,* he thought tiredly to himself as he watched Charles fuming before him.

“At any rate, I pray that you can find your bride as soon as possible. I will inform my country of this incident in a way that doesn’t disadvantage the Beltrum Kingdom. It is the least I can do to lessen your burdens right now, as a

friend,” Reiss said cheerfully, pasting an empty smile over his face.

“...I am most grateful for your consideration.” Charles sighed in relief, bowing his head at Reiss with utmost respect.

“It is nothing. Our fates are already intertwined. Let’s see this through to a successful end, yes?” Reiss said, chuckling quietly.

“Indeed.” Charles nodded with great vigor.

“Ah, speaking of which. I heard the president of the Ricca Guild, Liselotte Cretia, is among the invitees. Out of all the invitees from the Kingdom of Galarc, isn’t she the most important?” Reiss suddenly changed the topic, recalling the matter.

“Hm? Yes, she was invited in place of the royal family. The Ricca Guild’s influence in our kingdom is fairly deep-seated, after all,” Charles said somewhat uncomfortably. He was probably thinking about how undesirable it was to invite a great noble of Galarc amidst the current peace negotiations with the Proxia Empire, which were leaning towards the distancing of their relations with the Galarc Kingdom.

“Well, it’s true that you cannot ignore them outright. I’ve heard that she’s quite the talented woman, that Liselotte Cretia. The Ricca Guild’s name has reached even the Proxia Empire, after all.” Reiss showed no signs of concern towards the fact Liselotte was invited to the ceremony, chatting as though he was gossiping instead.

“Well, she’s still a fifteen-year-old girl. I’m sure the capabilities of her father, Duke Cretia, played a big part...” Charles said, watching Reiss’ expression carefully.

“However, that economic influence cannot be ignored, yes? For our future, too,” Reiss said with an implying tone.

For now, I suppose I can make an attempt at meddling with her. It’s a bit early in the grand scheme of things, but we originally planned on attacking Amande anyway.

The corners of his mouth turned upwards faintly in a repulsive smile.

Chapter 1: The Plan From Here

Revisiting the evening when Rio took Celia away from the capital...

Accompanied by Aishia, Rio carried Celia as he flew through the air with spirit arts, heading towards Duke Cretia's territory in the Kingdom of Galarc towards the southwest. Their current position was in the skies above a vast forest near the border of Beltrum, directly east of the capital.

In the vicinity was the trading city of Amande, where the Ricca Guild was based and Liselotte Cretia acted as governor. Rio had chosen Amande in the Kingdom of Galarc to escape to, partially because he wanted to put as much space between them and the capital of Beltrum, and partially because he wanted to stock up on all the daily necessities Celia would need at the Ricca Guild.

They talked about many things on their way here: the topics changed from Rio's original flight out of the kingdom, to what happened on his way to the Yagumo region, to what happened on the way back from Yagumo to Strahl, and so on. They took turns talking about what had happened in chronological order, but there was simply too much to touch upon to get through everything. Even now, they were still chatting away.

"I see, so now you're searching for the heroes from every area..."

Rio had explained to Celia about Miharuru, Aki, and Masato: how they were summoned from another world, how he had looked after them, how he had left them in the care of others, and how he was searching for their friends and family, who had a strong possibility of being heroes.

"Yes. The incident this time allowed me to confirm that the hero of Beltrum wasn't who I was searching for, but do you have any information about the other heroes, Professor?" Rio asked Celia hopefully. Despite how she had been shut away in the guest house of the castle for a while, he figured that, as a noble, she would have more gossip-like information coming her way than most others.

“I didn’t hear it through an official announcement, but I know of two other places other than Beltrum with sacred stones that summoned heroes. Also, there’s another sacred stone within Beltrum, too. It was probably taken, along with Princess Flora, by the Duke Huguenot faction. Were you aware of that?” Celia asked.

Rio’s eyes widened in awe before he smiled. “I knew I could count on you, Professor Celia. This is the first I’m hearing of any of that.”

Celia’s cheeks reddened somewhat shyly. “I-It’s no big deal. The hero summonings made quite a buzz, so I did a little research of my own. The rest was what I heard and overheard from others.”

“No, the researcher I questioned in the academy probably didn’t have any interest in current affairs, because he could only tell me the name of the hero that was summoned in the castle,” Rio said with a faint smile.

“Ahaha. Well, the nobles that choose to work as researchers tend to be an odd lot. But when you say you questioned a researcher... Ah, I see. You snuck into my room in the castle. And you’re flying through the air like this. It really is amazing, this spirit arts thing...” Celia suddenly came to her senses, expressing her awe towards spirit arts for the umpteenth time that day. There were too many shocking events and stories that had happened, completely numbing her to everything, but her nature as a researcher was strongly drawn towards spirit arts.

“Hmm. Rather than saying spirit arts is amazing, it’s more accurate to say that Aishia is amazing. The difference in ability is far more evident in spirit arts than it is in magic.” Rio hummed in contemplation before he spoke in reference to Aishia, who was flying beside them silently.

“Haruto is more amazing,” Aishia said simply.

Celia turned to Rio cheerfully, expression tinged with amusement. “Fufu. Aishia seems to be saying something to the contrary, though?”

“Ahaha. That can’t be right.” Spirits were known as the progenitors of spirit arts, and Aishia was a considerably high ranked one among them. However, Rio decided to easily laugh it off, as the conversation would get long if he went into detail. After all, Aishia was unlikely to budge from her stance.

“The two of you are both amazing to me... And I’m truly happy to see you’ve grown up into such a fine young man, Rio. You’re so much taller than me now, too.” Celia grinned as she complimented Rio.

He had been especially ridiculed during his school days for being unable to use magic, but he had actually been able to utilize an amazing ability in spirit arts instead, which he had used to save Celia from her predicament. That fact made her so unbelievably proud and happy that she could hardly contain herself.

“Thank you very much,” Rio said with a slight smile.

Celia was looking up at Rio’s face with a pleased expression, when she suddenly thought of something. “...Huh? Hold on, wait a minute. There was another person who was summoned along with the hero in the castle, but they weren’t able to communicate with anyone other than the hero. Were the kids under your care able to communicate?” she asked, her mind having been derailed from the topic of the hero search.

“Ah, umm... Well... I guess that part was kinda noticeable after all...” Rio grimaced with a somewhat troubled face.

“...Umm, was it perhaps something I shouldn’t have asked about?” Celia must have noticed the change in Rio’s expression.

“No, I was just wondering what would be the best way to explain... For now, since the sun is about to set, let’s rest around here for today. We’ll continue this conversation after that.” Rio shook his head evasively before turning to address Aishia beside him and slowly began to lower his altitude. “Let’s descend to a suitable clearing, Aishia.”

Although he had experience explaining to Miharuru and the others about how he had memories of his previous life, even if it was Celia — no, no matter who it was — he needed the time to prepare himself before explaining.

“Ah, okay.” Celia nodded hesitantly, softly tightening her grip that was hugging onto Rio. Then, once they found a clearing in the forest that they could land in, Rio gently lowered Celia down to the ground.

“I’ll prepare a place for us to sleep right away, so please wait a moment. Be

careful not to get your dress dirty.”

“...Okay. Are we staying here overnight?” With a slightly dazed expression, Celia looked around at the area nervously. There was nothing but dense undergrowth and thick trees in the dimly lit darkness, filling the forest with silence.

“Yes. But we won’t be camping outdoors, so don’t worry.” Rio crouched down and touched his hands against the ground with a grin. He was currently using spirit arts to secretly stabilize the ground foundation, but there was no way Celia could know that.

“Huh? But...” Celia tilted her head.

“*Dissolvo.*” Rio stood up and chanted. He held up his left hand with the Time-Space Cache armband on it and manipulated his essence, activating the sorcery hidden in the armband.

“Huh?! Wha...” Celia’s eyes widened in shock. Suddenly, the space before her eyes twisted and distorted, making a giant boulder appear.

“It looks just like a boulder, but the interior is a house. Please, come this way,” Rio explained with familiarity, walking towards the front entrance. However, Celia remained standing in a daze, completely at a loss for words.

“...”

The standard of sorcery in the Strahl region couldn’t even use the basics of time-space sorcery, so her surprise was reasonable.

“Professor?” Rio called out to Celia nervously, worried he had scared her a little too much.

“What... is... this?” Celia’s mouth opened and shut wordlessly.

“Umm, it’s called the Time-Space Cache. It uses a time-space sorcery that releases an isolated, empty space separated from time. Or rather, it’s a magic artifact with that inside it.” Rio folded back his left sleeve and showed Celia the Time-Space Cache he had equipped.

“The Time-Space... Cache...” Celia murmured the name and looked at his armband with great interest.

Then, after a long pause with nothing but her gazing at his arm, Rio called out to Celia once more. “Professor?”

“I can’t... anymore,” Celia whispered quietly.

“Eh? Could you please repeat that?”

“Argh! I can’t take it anymore!” With no concern for how her dress hem was dragging along the ground, Celia closed in on Rio in one lunge.

Rio was taken aback. “Y-Yes?” he stammered, taken aback.

“I was holding back from asking about everything, figuring it’d be better not to carelessly ask about those logic-defying spirit arts things, but... enough! Tell me more about that armband, and everything else! Or, rather... Will you let me study that armband?!” Seeing the advanced sorcery crystal had awakened the researcher’s heart within Celia. She looked up at Rio’s face from close-range.

“Wha... Ahaha!” Rio couldn’t help but burst into laughter. Celia returned to her senses with that and blushed faintly.

“...W-What’s so funny?” She asked in embarrassment.

“Nothing, it just brought back memories. Seeing that look return to your face makes me feel really happy, Professor.” Rio held back his laughter and smiled gently.

Celia flushed scarlet and pouted her lips. “Wha... G-Geez! It’s all because of you, showing me all these impossible things! Anyone knowledgeable about sorcery would have reacted in the same way, not just me. You can’t show this Time-Space Cache or any of your spirit arts in front of others, got it?! It would cause all sorts of unnecessary trouble!” she lectured with reproachful eyes.



“Ahaha, of course. But it’s only you right now, Professor, so there’s no need to hide it, right?” Rio gave a bright smile as he watched Celia in return.

“Ah... Oh, geez!” Celia’s blush reached its peak as she struggled for breath. Unable to look directly at Rio’s face, she looked downwards instead.

“Professor?” Rio inclined his head curiously, peering at Celia’s face.

“W-Wait! Just give me a minute! I have to silence my feelings first!” Celia waved her hands in a panic, trying to stop him from leaning in and getting a look at her face.

“...Yes?” Rio continued to tilt his head, but obeyed Celia for now.

“...Okay, done,” She said after a few deep breaths, looking up at Rio’s face. Belatedly noticing how they were still close enough to be hugging, she backed away slightly. She had been held in a bridal carry the entire way here, so it really was a rather belated realization.

That being said, being carried here was a necessity, and there was no need to be so close to each other right now. That difference was extremely important to Celia.

“Then, let’s head inside the house. Please, come this way. You too, Aishia — let’s go in.” Rio looked at Celia’s face and made sure she was all right, before turning on his heel to call out to Aishia and head towards the front door.

“Okay.” Aishia gave a short nod and followed Rio. Celia started walking forward hesitantly. Once the three of them entered the house, Celia looked around the open living space and widened her eyes.

“...I never imagined there could be such a pleasant living space inside a rock...”

“I can guarantee you that it’s comfortable to live in. Let’s get you changed first, shall we? We can’t have you remain in that wedding dress forever, now.”

“...Yeah. But... Do you have a change of clothes...?” Celia said, looking at Rio doubtfully. She had left the capital with nothing but the clothes on her back, so she didn’t have a change of clothes handy. Not to mention how they hadn’t stopped anywhere on the way here, as they wanted to put as much distance

between the capital as possible, leaving them no time for shopping.

“Let’s see. We’ll definitely go shopping tomorrow, but for today, you can just...”

Rio stared at Celia’s stature closely.



Rio changed from his overcoat and combat clothing into his usual casual wear and went about preparing tea in the living room. Some time later, Celia and Aishia finished changing in a different room and returned to the living room wearing comfortable dresses.

“Say, whose clothes are these?” Celia asked Rio and Aishia as she looked down at her completed outfit.

“They belong to one of the girls who was summoned along during the hero summonings. They lived in this house for a short while, so...”

The clothes that Celia was wearing right now were the ones that Miharu and the others had forgotten to take from the laundry when they moved to the spirit folk village. It was obvious at a glance that Miharu’s clothes wouldn’t fit Celia in terms of height and fit, so Rio had given her Aki’s clothes to try on.

It looks like Aki’s clothes are perfect for the Professor, just as I expected.

Rio couldn’t help but smile in amusement at how Celia could fit into the clothes of a middle school student.

“...Just out of curiosity, how old was the girl who owned these clothes?” Celia suddenly asked out of the blue.

“Umm... thirteen,” Rio answered after an awkward pause.

“And the other girl you mentioned?” Celia puffed up her cheeks a little.

“...Sixteen. Ah, is it a little small after all? Umm, Aki — that’s the girl’s name — is just about your height, Professor, so I thought it would work. If you’d like, I can prepare the other girl — Miharu’s — clothes instead...?” It was as clear as day that the clothes wouldn’t fit, but Rio tried to be considerate and offer anyway.

“I-It’s okay. Yeah, it’s okay... it’s okay, but... umm, i-it’s a little tight around my chest, maybe. Yes, just a little, tight... B-But it’s fine!” she refused in a shrill and upset voice, shaking her head. She’d realized that Miharu’s clothes wouldn’t fit her. Although, her criticism of the chest area of the clothing may have simply been for show...

“I see, around your chest...” The flow of the conversation naturally let Rio’s gaze towards Celia’s chest. Celia certainly did seem more feminine than Aki in that regard.

“G-Geez, don’t stare so much. I know they’re small, gosh! I’m sure you like big ones too, don’t you, Rio? Ugh...” Though she hadn’t exactly been ogled at, Celia’s face turned red and she hid her chest out of embarrassment. The woes of a young lady were complicated.

“Ahaha, that’s not true.” Rio shook his head with a strained smile.

“...H-Hmm. R-Really?” Celia’s eyes widened faintly as her interest was piqued by his response.

“Yes, I don’t believe a woman’s charms are decided by the size of her bust. You’re plenty charming, Professor, so please have more confidence in yourself,” Rio said, his answer a textbook response. However, he must have truly felt that way, as his words didn’t seem contrived.

For a moment, Celia blinked in a daze. “T-Thanks... Wait, what are we even talking about here? I-I’m sorry.” With a flustered thanks and apology, she smiled in relief. Rio also smiled shyly.

“That aside, which would you like to talk about first? The reason why I could communicate with the kids that were summoned along with the hero, or spirit arts and the Time-Space Cache? Or would you like a bath first?” he asked, awkwardly changing the subject.

“R-Right. Can we talk first, then? Since you’ve poured the tea and all already.” Celia nodded uncomfortably, on board with talking.

“Of course. Let’s sit down, then... You too, Aishia. Come to think of it, it’s been a long time since I’ve had tea with you, Professor.” Rio chuckled with a smile, inviting Celia to take a seat on the sofa, before serving the three of them

tea.

“Yeah, that’s true. It brings back memories...” Celia nodded with a smile as she recalled those times, before her expression suddenly changed. “Ah, but is it really okay for you to tell me?”

Rio tilted his head in question. “What do you mean?”

“Umm, the stuff about spirit arts and the Time-Space Cache aside, you seemed to be thinking kind of hard about how to explain the reason why you could communicate, so it seemed like you didn’t really want to say...” Celia explained nervously.

“Ah, no, it isn’t that I don’t want to say it. It’s just that I need to prepare my heart and find the right words to do so. You’ll probably be surprised, Professor,” Rio said with a troubled expression.

“I’ll be surprised?” Celia inclined her head curiously.

“Yes. I’m going to tell you something that doesn’t sound believable by any logical means... But I am not lying. I don’t want to keep it a secret from you forever, Professor, so will you listen to what I have to say?” Rio stared directly into Celia’s eyes.

“...About the reason why you could communicate, right?” Celia said nervously, having noticed that the air around Rio had changed.

Rio nodded quietly. “Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll believe you.” Celia nodded simply, without any sign of doubt.

“Wasn’t that a little quick?” Rio’s eyes widened a little in surprise.

“Because it’s you, Rio. I’ll believe anything you have to say,” Celia said, then smiled in amusement.

“...Thank you very much.” Rio was a little uneasy, and yet he smiled happily. Though it was faint, Aishia was smiling gently, too. Then, after a moment, he spoke up abruptly.

“I have the memories of a version of myself from another life.”

“...The memories of yourself... from another life?” Celia’s eyes rounded

slightly.

“They’re the memories of my past life, probably,” Rio supplemented.

“Memories... of your past life... Huh...” Celia looked dazed as she parroted Rio’s words back at him.

“...I guess it is hard to believe after all?” Rio asked timidly. As the concerned party, his senses were numbed into naturally accepting the fact, but any normal person would be more likely to find the statement delusional.

“Ah, no, that’s not it. I believe you. I believe you, and I’m not shocked... If anything, I can actually accept it so easily, I’m having trouble finding the words to explain why... Could you tell me a little more about it, for now?” Celia answered impatiently, pressing for more.

Rio widened his eyes and gently continued to speak. “...To start from the conclusion, the children who were summoned along with the hero happened to be from the same country and world that I lived in within my memories.”

“...So that’s why you were able to understand their words. But what did you mean by saying that they’re ‘probably’ the memories of your past life?”

“...There’s no way for me to tell if those memories are real, if they’re really *my* memories, if they are real, or if they’re simply the memories of another person.” There was only a subjective connection, and no objective connections at all. But because Rio was talking about himself from such a distant point of view and speaking so sadly, Celia raised her voice subtly, feeling some strange sense of resistance to what he was saying.

“That... may be true... But you really do have those memories, and the people who arrived were really from a world exactly the same as those memories, right?”

Rio nodded with a faint smile on his face. “...Yes. But whether those memories are mine or not does not matter right now. What’s more important is if this explains why I could communicate with them. What do you think?”

“I accept your reason about that, but...” Celia didn’t seem quite satisfied.

Rio grimaced at Celia’s reaction. “If I were to add one thing, these memories

awakened within me shortly after I turned seven years old. As you know, Professor, I was an orphan in the slums until then,” he said, adding to his explanation.

“...That’s around when we first met, right?”

“Yes. Actually, the first time we met in the slums was just after I regained those memories. I was still in the middle of my confusion when you spoke to me.” Rio looked back on that time and spoke with nostalgia.

“R...Really... No wonder you’ve seemed like a really calm and intelligent child ever since we met. It was as though you weren’t actually younger than me... Ahh, I see. No wonder... So that was why. I see...” Celia’s eyes widened as though she had realized something.

“Is something the matter?” Rio tilted his head and asked.

“Ah, no, it’s just about the reason why I accepted your words about your previous life’s memories so easily. I think it’s because it explains why you were always so mature in the past.”

“I see... What did I seem like to you back then, Professor?” Rio asked somewhat curiously.

“How did you seem... Well, you were mature and kind of isolated from your surroundings, and it was like I couldn’t see the limits of your potential...? Ah, but once I started talking to you properly, we became friends quite easily, so I thought you were a nice and polite child.” Celia recalled the Rio from back then as she spoke.

“...Is that so? Then if my memories hadn’t reawakened, you may have had a different impression of me,” Rio said, grimacing with a guilty look.

“Really?”

“I would have been more bitter and twisted. Because I was rather naive in those memories, I think what you saw, Professor, was a result of adding that to my orphan self.”

“I... see... So your personality changed when your memories returned. But I’m a little interested in exactly what kind of child you were before your memories

returned, too. You think if we met a little earlier, my impression of you would have changed, right?” Celia asked, peering at Rio’s face.

“...We probably wouldn’t have gotten along, honestly. I wouldn’t have replied properly if you asked me for directions, and I wouldn’t have tried to save Princess Flora.”

“Eh? R-Really?!” Celia’s eyes widened in shock.

“Yes. I was aggressive and didn’t trust other people. I believe I would have rejected your kindness, too, Professor.” His distrust of other people was still the same even today, however.

“Uh... B-But I wouldn’t have backed down! I would have been friends with that Rio, too,” Celia said eagerly, making Rio laugh with amusement.

“Ahaha.” It was all hypothetical, but with Celia, he may have been able to open his heart to her.

“I-It’s no laughing matter. I want to be friends with you no matter what, Rio!” Celia glared at him reproachfully.

“...Thank you very much. I’m glad we became friends, Professor.” Rio laughed happily.

“Y-Yeah,” Celia nodded with a blush, changing the topic to hide her embarrassment. “Wait, but how old was the Rio within your memories?”

Rio paused for a moment before answering the question. “In my memories... I was twenty years old.”

“T-Twenty... Which means... Huh? Wait a minute. Then mentally, this means you’re older than me, right? Because I was around twelve years old when we first met...” Combining the personality of a seven-year-old with the memories of a twenty-year-old didn’t mean that their mentality would combine to become a twenty seven years old. But, at the very least, his mental age was still older than Celia when they first met.

“Hmm... Is that so? Even though I may have merged with the memories and personality of myself as Haruto, I’m still mostly myself as Rio, so I’m more aware of my sixteen year old self as Rio right now, though I think the young part

of me may be strongly influenced...” Rio cocked his head as he answered, smiling faintly.

“Is that, so. Well, I guess... that’s how it is?” Celia responded rather disjointedly. She had suddenly become nervous at the idea of someone she had thought was younger the whole time being older. And Rio was being oddly unperturbed about it all.

“I don’t normally pay attention to it, so I’m not sure myself. It’s not something that can be answered by just thinking it over, either... At the same time, I don’t feel anything strange if you call me by my past name, Haruto,” Rio said, laughing loudly.

“Your name was Haruto... Oh, I see. That’s why you chose it as your alias,” Celia realized with satisfaction.

“Yes. I figured it’d be easier to relate to than a completely unknown name.”

“Aishia called you Haruto as well. Oh, I’m sorry, Aishia — We’ve been completely conversing between ourselves,” Celia apologized to Aishia, who had been silently listening beside Rio.

“It’s okay. Now is the time for Celia to talk to Haruto. I’m a little sleepy anyway.” Aishia yawned cutely and shook her head.

“Ahaha, thank you,” Celia thanked Aishia, then turned to address Rio. “...She’s quiet, but she’s a really nice girl.”

Aishia sleepily leaned her head against Rio’s shoulder. “Yes, Aishia’s helped me out a lot.” Rio smiled with familiarity and nodded, but Celia’s eyes rounded with shock.

“S-So it seems. And she’s really cute and pretty, too,” Celia said in a strangely high pitched voice.

W-What?! Why has she suddenly started clinging to him so naturally?! While the smile from their conversation remained on her face, Celia’s thoughts nearly came to a screeching halt.

Rio detected the change in Celia’s expression. “Professor?”

“B-By the way, I heard some things from Aishia during the time we were

waiting to meet up with you in the capital. About spirit arts, and the fact Aishia's a spirit." Celia snapped back to her senses and guided the conversation towards Aishia. She was afraid of directly asking why the two of them were sticking so closely together.

"Yes. How much did you hear from Aishia?" Rio asked calmly.

"Umm, that Aishia was your contracted spirit, and a little about the basic knowledge regarding spirit arts. I was worried about whether we'd be able to meet up properly back then, so I wasn't able to really pay attention as I would have liked. Could you tell me more about that too? As well as about your relationship. What is a contracted spirit, anyway?" Celia narrowed her eyes as she emphasized the part about their relationship and questioned spirit arts and spirits in a way that couldn't be avoided.

"Umm, how much do you know about spirits and spirit arts to begin with, Professor?" Rio felt a strange sense of vigor from Celia, making him reply a bit nervously.

As far as the Strahl region went, those two topics were not common knowledge. Reading a wide range of old literature would reveal books that dealt with the topic a little, but there was nothing that went into much detail.

"...I've known about the existence of spirits for a while. But I've only seen them mentioned in books, and never imagined them to actually exist. Aishia looks like a normal girl to me, so she doesn't really seem like it."

"In other words, you don't have much background knowledge about spirits nor spirit arts, but you're willing to believe that she's a spirit?"

"Well, she did turn into her spirit form while we were waiting for you outside the capital. It didn't seem like a spirit art that could simply turn her invisible... So I had no choice but to believe what I was seeing," Celia said, sighing tiredly.

"I see. Then, to start with a simple explanation of spirits first, spirits are incorporeal forms of mana with a sense of self."

"...Mana?"

"Unlike ode... or magic essence, which is life energy, would it be easier if I told you to imagine mana as the natural energy that's simply hanging in the air?"

Both sorcery and spirit arts manipulate essence to interfere with mana and create world-altering phenomena. That's a point they have in common."

"What is that? This is the first time I'm hearing it..." Celia made a dumbfounded face, though she seemed quite interested. Her thirst for knowledge had been activated.

"Unlike how sorcery relies on the spell formula to interfere with mana, spirit arts is characteristic by how the user directly interferes with mana. That relation means it's easier to standardize the event of activating sorcery, and while spirit arts are more flexible in controlling events, it is harder to learn."

"Would I be able to use spirit arts, too?"

"Yes. If you train, you can refine the skills in order to use spirit arts. However, you will need to remove all the spell formulas you have taken into your body through spell contracts."

"Remove spell formulas from my body... You mean you can't learn spirit arts if you acquire magic?" Celia questioned with wide eyes.

"Right. In order to interfere with mana, the user's imagination and will plays an important factor, but if you have spell formulas within your body, they won't be transmitted to the mana efficiently."

"...Which means... wait a minute. Then... the reason you failed at all those spell contracts and were unable to acquire magic during your time at school was because using spirit arts made you unable to learn magic, or something? Were you failing on purpose?"

"That's very astute of you... But not quite. The reason why I failed at the spell contracts and was unable to acquire magic was because I had a spirit contract with Aishia. At that time, I didn't know anything about spirits or spirit arts." Rio smiled softly, shaking his head as he spoke.

"So that's where the spirit contract comes in... In that case, do you have to be contracted to a spirit to use spirit arts?"

"No, there's no requirement for a spirit contract in order to use spirit arts. However, since the spirits are sublimated forms of mana, which is essential to the use of spirit arts, their harmony with spirit arts is excellent. As a result, the

contracted user's spirit arts affinity rises once a contract has been formed. On the other hand, the disadvantage is that contracting with a spirit means that spell contracts cannot succeed, making you unable to use magic."

"...In other words, you've been contracted to Aishia since your school days? Then such intimacy... is understandable, I think?" Knowing that they had been contracted for so long made Celia boldly ask for the reason behind their intimacy. She pouted her lips a little, sulking.

"No... it seems like that, but Aishia has been asleep until only recently, and we were contracted without my knowledge too. I tried to ask her the reason, but it appears Aishia doesn't have any memories from before she woke up..." Rio scratched at his head with a troubled expression, glancing at Aishia slumped against him.

"...Really?" Celia asked, looking between their two faces.

"Yes. According to an acquaintance that's knowledgeable about spirits, Aishia's rank as a spirit is high, but she's a newly born spirit... Like a baby spirit, almost."

"Hmm... Is that so?" Then the fact that Aishia was slumped against Rio may just be because she wanted to be doted on. Such a thought crossed Celia's mind, but she didn't voice it out loud to confirm it.

"Do you understand our relationship now?" Rio asked, watching Celia's expression.

"Yeah, well... I guess." Celia nodded somewhat reluctantly.

"Then next is the explanation about the Time-Space Cache, right?"

"There's that too, but..."

"Is there something else bothering you?" Rio asked.

"Where did you get that knowledge and those magic artifacts from, Rio? You didn't seem to know about spirits and things when you were at the academy, so I'm sure you learned about them after you left Beltrum, but..."

"Actually, on my way to the Yagumo region, I met some people that lived quietly, away from humans. They taught me many things. About spirit arts,

about sorcery — their technology was far beyond what was available in the Strahl region — and while they had cut off all contact with outsiders, I was fortunate enough to be accepted as an acquaintance...” Out of consideration for the spirit folk, Rio spoke vaguely about their specific circumstances.

“I see... So that’s where you got the Time-Space Cache.” Celia read the room and chose not to pry too deeply about the identity of the people that Rio was referring to.

“Yes. They presented it to me as a symbol of our friendship.”

“You must really have their trust if they would give you such a bold and amazing artifact. Or is it something that can be easily made by those people?”

“No, it isn’t something that can be mass produced easily,” Rio said out of respect toward the spirit folk. He shook his head with a hint of a smile.

“I see... Umm... Then it wouldn’t be good to research it blindly after all, right?” Celia looked at Rio’s expression regretfully, thinking her earlier statement was careless.

“No, I don’t mind if you look at it. If there’s any knowledge you wish to acquire, I can tell you as much as I am able to. As long as you follow the condition of not spreading or circulating the knowledge you gain... But I’m sure you can be trusted with that, Professor.” Rio gave his ready assent, showing his strong trust in Celia.

“Uh... T-Thank you. If that’s the case, then I... I swear. I’m even willing to bind myself in a sorcery contract,” Celia said her thanks uneasily, giving her oath with a shy blush in her cheeks.

“I understand. Well, we can leave the troublesome rituals for later. Would you like to have a look now?” Rio said, reaching for his left arm with his right hand.

“...No. It’s a very tempting offer, but I’ll pass for now. There’s been so many shocking truths... I’m a little tired.” Celia shook her head with a strained smile.

“Oh, then how about a bath instead? It’ll help you relax,” Rio suggested.

“A bath! That sounds great...” Celia’s face brightened at once. She got close to

Rio sitting directly opposite to her when Aishia's sleepily relaxing form entered her field of vision. "...B-But could I relax a little more here? Watching Aishia being all sleepy has made me feel a little sleepy too. S-She looks pretty comfortable," she said in a high pitched voice, glancing over at Aishia.

"Then, let's decide what your room should be, Professor. There's lots of space, so you can use whichever one you wish... but if you need a studio, then a bigger room would be better?" Rio replied with a cheerful suggestion. Celia pouted and stared fixedly at Rio's face with a reproachful look, as though she was making an appeal.

"...Yeah, let's," she agreed a little gloomily after a moment.

Rio sensed Celia's suspicious behavior and tilted his head in question. "Umm, is something the matter? Professor... Wait, Aishia?"

Aishia stood straight up, then briskly walked over to Celia and stopped in front of her.

"W-What?" Celia looked up at Aishia nervously.

"This way." Aishia grabbed Celia's hand and gently made her stand up.

"What?!" Celia raised a voice of objection in surprise, but Aishia continued to pull her hand.

"H-Huh?" Celia was made to sit down next to Rio. She let out a squeak; her recoil from being made to sit down had caused her to lean on Rio closely before she realized it. Seeing Celia like that, Aishia gave a single nod before sitting down on the opposite side, snuggling close to Rio like she had been earlier.

"The three of us should just go to sleep like this," she suggested with Rio sandwiched in the middle.

Once she finally processed the situation, Celia's face turned red. "Wh... Wh-Wh-What?!"

"C-Calm down, Professor!" Rio tried to appease the suddenly panicking Celia.

"W-What is this, what is this?!" With a bright red face, Celia questioned Aishia seated on the other side.

"You wanted to do this too, no?" Aishia replied bluntly.

Celia shook her head. “T-That’s! That’s...!” she yelled, feeling as though she was losing her mind.

“P-Professor, calm down! Look, take a deep breath.” Rio grabbed Celia’s shoulder and faced her. With that, Celia’s movements froze for a second, but meeting Rio’s eyes from point-blank range had Celia blushing even more.

“B-Baaath! No no no, I have to take a bath, a bath!” Celia stood up in a fluster, running out of the living room noisily.

“P-Professor?!” Rio called after Celia to stop her, but her footsteps showed no sign of ceasing. However, before long, Celia trudged back into the living room.

“...W-Where is the bathroom?” she asked, embarrassed.

Chapter 2: The First Night

Several minutes later, Aishia accompanied Celia into the changing room beside the stone bathroom. In contrast to Celia, who removed her one piece dress in a hesitant manner, Aishia instantly released the material form of her clothes and stood in only her underwear.

“...Ah, that underwear’s made by the Ricca Guild, isn’t it?” Celia asked in a bright voice. She had gazed in amazement at how Aishia stripped in the blink of an eye before she realized the design of Aishia’s underwear seemed familiar.

“Yup, that’s right. Miharuru chose it for me.” Aishia nodded. She was wearing a pale pink bra and boy shorts with small but cute and elegant ribbons on it.

“Miharuru... that’s one of the girls Rio took in, right? It really is an adorable design. Can I feel what the fabric is like?” Celia asked with great interest.

“Sure,” Aishia agreed readily.

“Then if you don’t mind... Oh, and you have a really gorgeous figure, you know? Your skin is youthful and beautiful, too, just like a baby’s... Wait, we were talking about the underwear right now. Underwear...” Celia’s eyes were captivated by Aishia’s good proportions before she shook her head and reached for the underwear.

“Yup yup, this really is good quality fabric. Not only is it comfortable to wear, its design is well thought out. I also have several of these, but the Ricca Guild’s products are popular, so they always sell out of their low stock in the Beltrum Kingdom. It’s pretty hard to get your hands on them,” Celia said.

“They sell lots in Amande. You should just get Haruto to buy you some, too, since we’ll be going shopping in Amande tomorrow.”

“It’s the headquarters of the Ricca Guild, so I’m sure there’ll be lots in stock, but is it really okay? The underwear in the Ricca Guild is fairly expensive.”

“It’s fine. Haruto is rich,” Aishia said, giving her approval of Rio’s financial status.

“S-Still, it makes me feel bad having him buy expensive things for me... There are lots of other things I need to buy, too.” Celia frowned, feeling bad for causing trouble.

“Underwear is a necessity, so it wouldn’t be a wasteful purchase. And Haruto would want Celia to wear good quality underwear,” Aishia said on Rio’s behalf. There was no knowing what kind of expression Rio would have made if he was present, but he probably would have said something similar if he was pressed on the subject.

“A-Ahaha... W-Well, I can’t show Rio my underwear, b-but I’ll make sure to talk to him about it.” Celia must have pictured something in her mind, as her voice squeaked with embarrassment.

“Yup.” Aishia nodded, moving her hands to her bra to take it off.

“...Huh? Come to think of it, how come you have real underwear when your other clothes are all materialized...?” Celia suddenly noticed.

“Yeah. Underwear is complicated to make.”

“Oh, I see... So you can’t make anything complicated.”

“Actually, it’s more like the clothes I usually wear are a part of myself. I can change the color and design a little, but I generally can’t create anything else,” Aishia said, giving a concise explanation of her materialized clothes.

“Huh...” Celia hummed with deep curiosity.

“Let’s get in already,” Aishia said, sliding off her boy shorts in one go before heading toward the bathroom.

...S-She’s a rather bold girl, isn’t she? She doesn’t seem to care about what others think at all. Celia couldn’t help but blush at the sight of the beautiful body that entered her line of vision. However, she had no reason to remain in the changing room by herself, so she took off her cute minisole that she’d been wearing as underwear and headed toward the bathroom, too.



When Celia opened the door that led from the changing room to the bathroom, she looked around the room and froze.

“What... is this place...?”

The sight of the bathroom interior far surpassed anything she had pictured in her mind. It was a wide, spacious room; the walls were bare stone, long in depth and with a high ceiling. Beyond the spacious washing area that was tiled with stone was a wide bathtub, also made of stone. The water spouting artifacts lined along the stone wall continuously supplied hot water, making a white steam rise off the surface of the bathwater. Celia stood in dumbfounded amazement for a while.

“It’s a bath...?” Aishia answered Celia’s question, tilting her head to the side.

“...A-Ah, no, I can see that, but... What?!” Celia objected in a fluster. It was clearly different to a traditional bathroom in the Strahl region.

At the very least, it wasn’t the standard for bathtubs to be deep enough to immerse oneself. Not even the royalty and nobility had bathing facilities this fancy, and it wasn’t possible for them to make hot water come pouring out endlessly as it did here. The climate of the region was rather dry, so they couldn’t secure a water source that could be used so wastefully. It’d be a different matter in a land with hot springs, but nothing like that existed in Beltrum or Beltrant.

“What’s wrong?” Aishia asked Celia curiously.

“W-What do you mean ‘what’? What’s going on with this bath...? What is this — why is the hot water flowing endlessly?” Celia asked, pointing at the stone wall where the water was refilling the bathtub.

“That’s a magic artifact that makes hot water,” Aishia replied.

“A m-magic artifact... No, but... How is the essence supplied to it?! If the hot water is continuously being created, wouldn’t the essence consumption be ridiculously high?”

Celia’s question was reasonable; water sorcery already used a higher amount of magic essence than the other elemental sorceries, but to have a spell formula that created water *and* heated it up at the same time would use even more essence than that. If it was left running around the clock, it would continue using up essence much like a snowball effect.

“A high quality spirit stone is being used as the core of all the magic artifacts in the house, so as long as that one is replenished with essence regularly, it’s fine,” Aishia answered easily.

“Spirit stone... That’s another term I haven’t heard of before.”

Celia sighed tiredly. Even though she had come to the bathroom to wash away her tiredness, it seemed to have the reverse effect on her.

“Come. I’ll teach you how to use the artifact,” Aishia beckoned in a calm voice.

“...Okay.” Celia put on a smile of resignation and followed Aishia, deciding to put herself at ease for now. Aishia then explained how to use the hot water artifacts placed along the bathtub. “Before you submerge yourself in the water, you first wash your body and hair. This is the soap.”

At Aishia’s suggestion, they started to wash their bodies first. She handed Celia a bottle with body wash inside.

Celia removed the lid from the bottle she received and checked the inside, her eyes widening quite a bit. “Huh? This is soap...? Wait, isn’t this a liquid?! And it smells really nice too!” She was even more stunned after sniffing the scent of the soap.

In the Strahl region, solid soap was the standard. On top of that, it was already considered a high class item — despite the quality itself being only so-so. It often smelled rather bad, too.

“I heard that the Ricca Guild was extending their hand toward the development of soap, but...” Perhaps it was because there had been issues in the development process, or the stock had simply been too low, Celia thought.

“This soap was made by Haruto.”

Celia’s eyes widen in shock. “Huh, really?!”

“Yeah. He made all kinds of soap while Miharuru and the others were here. Miharuru has approved of the quality of each one.” Shampoo, conditioner, body wash, and maybe a face wash was enough if it were just a man living alone, but with Miharuru and Aki around, Rio tried to make all the varieties of soap he

learned to create in the village.

“Huh... T-Then, can I use it right away?” Celia asked with great interest. She was also interested in this Miharu girl whose name kept on coming up, but right now, her curiosity was piqued toward the unknown but nice-smelling soap.

“Of course. What do you usually wash first? Your hair, body, or face?”

“Huh? Umm, maybe face? I have some light makeup on from the ceremony still.”

“Then use this one.” Aishia handed Celia the bottle with cleanser in it.

She first started with cleansing her face; after slowly and carefully washing off her makeup, she next washed her hair and body.

“Wow! My hair and skin feel completely different! It’s so much better than normal!” Celia said with a fully satisfied expression after everything had been washed.

“Let’s get into the bath, then,” Aishia suggested.

“Okay!” Celia replied cheerfully. Wrapping her hair up in a steamed towel, she carried her feet over to the bathtub and got inside it with Aishia.

“Wah, hah...” At the sensation of the hot water wrapping around her body, Celia unthinkingly let out a coquettish sound.

“So warm.” Aishia also smiled happily beside her.

“...I could get used to this.” Celia sank into the bath water and completely relaxed her entire body, letting the stress drain out. It was her first time sitting in a bath this large and deep.

“You can come here every day from here on out, you know,” Aishia said.

“I see... I look forward to it,” Celia giggled with a smile.

...It still doesn’t feel real, she thought sentimentally. Was it really okay for her to be this happy? When she thought about the family she left behind in the kingdom, guilt rose up within her and made her frown.

“From now on, you can think about the future with Haruto.” Aishia must have noticed the slight change in Celia’s expression, prompting her to speak. Celia

widened her eyes.

“...Yeah, thank you. You always seem to be aloof, but you’re actually rather sharp, aren’t you?”

“That’s not true.” Aishia shook her head slowly. Suddenly, Celia grinned widely. “Hey, Aishia. I know you only woke up recently, but do you know anything about the past Rio?” she asked.

“I know everything there is to know about Haruto.”

“Umm, does that mean you have memories from when you were asleep, too?”

“No. It’s just that the things Haruto saw and heard flowed into me through our contract’s connection.”

Celia’s eyes widened in surprise. “...That’s amazing. I don’t know about ancient sorcery, but that’s an art that cannot be done in modern day sorcery, for sure.”

“It’s hard even with spirit arts. Telepathy is one thing, but sharing memories between each other requires quite a high level of mind synchronization.”

“I see. ...Hm? But isn’t that... It sounds like you’re saying that your consciousness and Rio’s consciousness are strongly tied together, almost...?” It was something Celia couldn’t overlook.

“That’s what a spirit contract is. We’re spiritually bound together on a soul level,” Aishia agreed bluntly.

“Wha...” Celia was at a loss for words. *T-That’s not fair!* she thought in her mind. Aishia tilted her head curiously.

Celia met Aishia’s eyes; fearing she had been seen through, she flinched, before purposefully changing the subject. “T-That aside, Rio’s been able to use spirit arts since his days in the academy, right?”

“Yup. He was self-taught, so his technical skills were a little clumsy, but he worked hard at it by himself,” Aishia agreed with a nod.

“I-I see. He never showed any sign of that, so I never noticed, but he really worked hard...” Celia smiled somewhat wistfully. Considering how out of the

ordinary spirit arts was, her judgment made sense... though she was a little sad that he hid it from her at the time.

“The reason why Haruto didn’t tell you wasn’t because he didn’t trust you,” Aishia uttered simply. She’d hit the nail on the head.

“I-I know that. It isn’t something to tell someone for no reason, and even telling someone trustworthy can be risky. Rio isn’t that kind of person. That is, how should I put it...”

“Even when he’s in trouble, he doesn’t really rely on others. He tries to solve it himself,” Aishia pointed out, making Celia nod along furiously.

“Yes, like that!”

“But, he’s a little different from before. He’s still a little shy about it, but he’s starting to rely on others more,” Aishia said regarding Rio’s growth, which was something that Celia was unaware of.

“Huh, is that so... So he’s grown up that much in the time we were apart...” Celia’s eyes widened in interest as she watched Aishia with envy in her eyes.

“It’s thanks to Celia,” Aishia said.

“R-Really?” Celia blinked, looking shocked.

“Yup. Of course, part of it was also because he met lots of warm people on his journey and grew close to them, but the first person to show Haruto kindness was Celia. Celia stayed beside Haruto throughout his whole academy life,” Aishia said, showing a rare smile.

“...” Celia found herself captivated by Aishia’s soft, warm smile without realizing it.

“Please be kind to Haruto, as you always have,” Aishia said in conclusion.

“...Fufu, of course I will.” Celia smiled gently, nodding happily.





The two girls continued to chat for a while. Then, Celia and Aishia left the bathroom and returned to the living room.

“Rio, that was a wonderful bath. Thank you. Wait... What’s that nice smell?” Celia called out to Rio, who was just on his way between the kitchen and dining table, when an appetizing scent wafted over to her nose.

“I prepared dinner while the two of you were in the bath. You must be hungry, no?” Rio asked.

“Yup, I’m starving!” Celia agreed energetically. Her stomach growled loudly.

“So it seems,” Rio said with a chuckle.

“I-It’s not what you think! Wait, it’s true that I’m hungry, but I haven’t eaten since breakfast, you know?!” Celia excused herself in a fluster, face blushing red.

“I know. I just finished the last dish, so let’s dig in. You can sit at the table first.” With that, Rio headed toward the kitchen.

“Uuh...!” Celia blushed red, slapping her tummy several times.

“Let’s go, Celia. This way,” Aishia called out.

“O-Okay.” Celia nodded shyly, trotting along after Aishia.

“Uwah, it looks delicious...” Celia’s eyes widened.

Lined on the dining table was a rice container with freshly cooked white rice, along with western main dishes like bread, beef stew, steamed tomatoes with rolled cabbage, terrine, and salad.

“They’re all just made from leftover ingredients lying around. I grilled some hamburg steaks, too.” Rio carried over a plate with the steaks on it.

“This is a whole feast...” Celia gulped.

After they took their seats and finished preparing, Aishia clapped her hands together and gave the Japanese greeting that was said before eating a meal.

“Itadakimasu.”

“I-ta-da-ki-ma-su?” Celia tilted her head curiously at the unfamiliar words and action from Aishia.

“It’s a word from the other world, like a prayer before eating, or like a greeting. Kind of like offering your gratitude to the cook and food,” Rio explained.

“Huh. Then, *itadakimasu*. Thank you, Rio.” Celia imitated Aishia’s behavior.

“No problem. My turn, now. *Itadakimasu*.” After Rio also said his pre-meal greetings, they finally began to eat.

Celia delicately handled her knife and fork to slice a piece of terrine and bring it to her mouth. She grinned brightly almost immediately. “I’ll try the terrine first... Wow, it’s good!”

“I’m glad to hear that.” As a noble, Celia was far more knowledgeable about gourmet foods than the average person; getting high praise for the food from someone like Celia was something to be proud of.

“I’ll try the steamed cabbage next... The broth looks a little red. What kind of flavor is that? Wait... Uwah, it’s so soft!” Celia lightly pressed her knife into it to see the surface slice immediately. She then pushed a little harder and gracefully cut off a slice.

“I used an ingredient unavailable in the Strahl region called a tomato. Please give it a taste first.”

“Tomato? Okay. Then, I will... Ah, there’s meat and cheese inside it! I can already tell this will be delicious with just this. Geez...!” At Rio’s urging, Celia moved her knife and fork. She moved a small slice of rolled cabbage to her mouth before wriggling a little.

“Is it delicious?” Rio asked as he observed Celia for her reaction with a grin on his face.

“Yup, it’s delicious! So good!” Celia nodded her head furiously like an attention-seeking dog.

“Thank goodness. Please try the stew and hamburg and everything else. It goes well with both the bread and the white food over there.”

“Huh, what’s this white thing?”

“This is called ‘rice,’ a grain used as a staple food instead of wheat in the Yagumo region. It’s possible that a similar grain is cultivated in certain areas of the Strahl region too, though...” Rio explained.

“Hmm. At the very least, I haven’t seen grain served like this before. Well, whatever. I’ll try a little first...” Celia scooped a little rice onto her plate.

“The rice itself doesn’t have any particular taste, so you eat it together with flavorful side dishes,” Rio lectured.

“Okay. Then, with this hamburg... Aah, geez, it really is yummy. Yeah, this is, definitely...” After smiling broadly at the taste of the hamburg, Celia followed it up with a small forkful of rice. She chewed for a few moments, checking the taste. It was her first time eating the food, but she seemed to like it quite a bit.

“There’s lots, so please eat your fill.”

“Thank you. But with a meal this delicious, I can’t help but want to drink some alcohol, too.”

“I have good alcohol as well. *Dissolvo*.” Rio responded to Celia’s request by immediately using his Time-Space Cache. Suddenly, a wooden alcohol bottle appeared on the dining table.

“You really leave nothing to be desired...” Celia laughed with an almost exasperated smile. Rio poured the alcohol into three glasses and served them to Celia and Aishia.

“Okay, cheers.”

“Cheers!” With a toast from Rio, Celia and Aishia both raised their glasses and voices. Celia ecstatically enjoyed the scent of the alcohol before bringing her mouth to the glass. Her eyes widening in astonishment.

“?!”

Her expression changed at once, and she peered fixedly at the contents of the glass. “W-Where is this from?!” She asked, taken aback.

“I picked up along my journey.” To be precise, it was sake made in the spirit folk village.

“Which means in the Strahl region...”

“It doesn’t exist.”

“I-I see...” Celia hung her head in disappointment at Rio’s answer.

“Is it good?”

“It’s not just good. Out of all the alcohol I’ve had until now, this is unmistakably the best tasting one I’ve ever had — I guarantee it! This must have been quite expensive for a single bottle, I’m sure,” Celia declared heatedly. As a noble, she must have had many types of high quality alcohol before, so her assessment was quite reliable.

“I see. Well, there are no plans for it to be sold as of right now. The only ones who can drink it in the Strahl region are us,” Rio stated proudly.

“...How utterly extravagant.” Celia muttered quietly, her smile twitching.

With the soap from the bath earlier, the magic artifacts contained in it, and all the other things today, Celia’s idea of reality was crashing down around her. They were hogging all this knowledge and technology that could produce tremendous riches all to themselves, so an indescribable feeling of guilt rose within her.

That aside, their meal time passed by harmoniously until most of the food was eaten in the blink of an eye.

“*Gochisousamadeshita.*” Rio and Aishia clapped their hands together and gave their end of meal greeting.

“*Gochisousamadeshita.*” Celia imitated the two of them with awkward pronunciation.

“Here, have some tea to help you digest.” Rio poured some tea he had warmed up in advance into a teacup and served it to Celia and Aishia.

“Thank you. This tea uses some good quality tea leaves, too.” Celia’s nose twitched as she sniffed before she smiled with satisfaction.

“I’m just pouring it the same as always, though. You’re free to drink as much as you want in this house, and there are many other types of tea leaves available, too,” Rio said, laughing loudly.

“Honestly, the longer I stay in this house the more my sense of reality flies out the window.” Celia smiled wryly with a sigh.

“By the way, I was thinking we should go out tomorrow to buy the daily necessities you need. Is there anything else you want to do, Professor?”

Celia frowned and hesitated for a long moment before speaking up timidly. “...Umm, I was hoping I could at least inform my father of my safety. Would that be okay?”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Rio agreed immediately.

“...Is that okay?” Celia’s eyes rounded, as she was taken by surprise.

“Yes. Judging by your reaction, you must have worried about this. I should have brought it up first. I apologize for my lack of consideration...” Rio said with an ashamed expression.

“N-No, not at all! I should be the one to apologize. I’m causing nothing but trouble for you.” Celia frowned apologetically.

“You’re no trouble at all, Professor. I told you before we left, remember? That I’ll do whatever I can to make sure everything returns to its proper place.” Rio shook his head gently and smiled cheerfully.

Celia was moved to tears. “Y-Yeah. Thank you, thank you so much. I was hoping there’d be some good way of informing him of my safety, since it’s not like I can meet him in person, but I couldn’t think of anything, so it was hard to bring up... I’m sorry for putting this on you. It’s not your fault,” she said sadly.

“...Then, how about writing a letter? As soon as we finish tomorrow’s shopping,” Rio suggested in a soft voice.

“A letter?” Celia blinked, her eyes widening.

“I’ll personally deliver it to your house. Just like when I snuck into the castle,” Rio said, grinning mischievously.

Celia gazed at him in surprise and understanding. “Ah, I see... Th-Then, can I come along too?!”

Rio nodded easily. “Yes, of course!”



After Rio had his turn bathing, it was time for bed. With Celia's room decided, all that was left was to go to sleep.

"Good night, then."

"Yes. Good night, Professor."

They said their farewells for the night and left the living room. Celia watched Rio's departing back with a pleasant smile, before turning on her heel to leave, too.

"W-Wait! Wait, hold on a minute! Hold it right there!" Rio and Aishia were about to enter the same room together, so she called out to them in a panic.

Rio and Aishia both froze mid-step, turning to face Celia. "Is something the matter?"

"D-Don't give me that. Why are you two trying to enter the same room so naturally? W-What do you intend on doing — I mean, you're going to sleep, right?" Celia asked in a high-pitched voice.

"Huh? That's right... Ah, I'm sorry. This is what we always do." Rio looked at Aishia and gave a strained smile, scratching at his head awkwardly. It had become so natural for Aishia to always be beside him; Aishia tilted her head curiously.

"A-Always?! Always sleeping together?!" Celia's eyes widened in shock.

"N-No. Well, yes, but please calm down first, Professor. We aren't doing anything weird," Rio said hesitantly, first trying to calm Celia down. Aishia only slept in the same room as him on the condition that she was in her spirit form, but he wasn't able to explain that on the spur of the moment.

"A-A-Anything weird... B-But, you're sleeping in the same room together... right?" she questioned in a barely audible voice, unable to look Rio and Aishia directly in the eye. Celia seemed to be imagining something as she blushed.

"We're in the same room, but its impossible for something physical to happen accidentally between us since, well, Aishia is in her spirit form."

"Spirit... form..." When Rio explained the circumstances succinctly, Celia

simply blinked.

“Spirits like Aishia use magic essence as their source of energy. By binding a spirit contract, they are able to replenish their essence through their contract connection. And the closer they are to the contract party, the more efficient this is... Right, Aishia?”

“There’s that, too, but being beside Haruto is calming.” Aishia nonchalantly revealed her true feelings, tightly clinging to Rio. At such an easily misunderstood statement, Rio froze.

Celia came to a sudden stop and stiffened, too. “...H-Huh, is that, so... H-How close of you,” she said in a horribly upset squeak.

Worried about Celia, Rio hurriedly called out to her. “P-Professor.”

“W-What?” Celia once again feigned composure and awkwardly inclined her head.

“No, umm, how should I put this...” Rio scratched at his head with a troubled expression.

“Do you want to sleep with us?” Aishia suddenly suggested.

“E-Eeh?” Rio’s eyes rounded in surprise.

“Celia should just sleep in the same room. Then I can sleep in my physical form, too. It’s no big deal.”

“No no no...” Rio murmured. There was most definitely a problem.

“You don’t want to, Haruto?”

“That’s not the problem here...” Rio looked at Celia with an expression that was borderline pained. Celia froze, her face turned bright red. She returned to her senses when she noticed Rio’s gaze, making her yell in astonishment.

“...W-What are you saying, Aishia?!”

“We went into the bath together,” Aishia stated simply.

“Huh... What do you mean?” Unable to understand the meaning of the sudden statement, Celia looked at her questioningly.

“During naptime earlier, Celia said you have to take a bath before sleep. Since

we had baths, that means the three of us can sleep together, right?” Aishia explained, peering at Celia’s face.

“N-No! T-That wasn’t what I meant when I said that!” Finally understanding the meaning of her statement, Celia shook her head in a fluster.

Aishia tilted her head curiously. “Then what did you mean...?”

“I-I mean... That’s not what I meant. Got it, Rio?!” Celia found herself at a loss for words. She looked over at Rio to seek help.

“Ah,ahaha... I know.” Rio agreed with an uncomfortable laugh.

“...In other words, Celia doesn’t want to sleep together?” Aishia seemed to come to her own answer as she looked between Rio and Celia.

“Uhh...” Celia mumbled, not really wanting to reply.

“Umm, I guess so?” Rio nodded nervously as he cocked his head in confusion. He had the feeling someone had missed the point somewhere, but he figured it was better not to think too deeply about it.

“Then, let’s sleep. I’m sleepy...” With a small yawn, Aishia pulled at Rio’s arm.

“W-Wait, Aishia?!” Rio tried to stop Aishia, glancing at Celia.

After a brief moment of conflict, Celia made up her mind and called out to Rio and Aishia. “...G-Geez! I get it, I get it already!”

The two stopped and turning around to face Celia. “Umm... What do you get?” Rio asked timidly.

“I-I’ll sleep in the same room. I-I just can’t overlook the two of you sleeping together. I need to check if it’s really problematic or not!” Celia declared with a squeak of embarrassment.

“E-Eeh?!” Rio let out a hysterical noise. He had never imagined Celia would say something like that.

“W-What? Aishia can sleep in the same room as you, but I can’t?” Celia glared at Rio’s face reproachfully.

“I-It’s not a matter of whether you can or can’t. Aishia sleeps in her spirit form anyway...” Rio said, trying to persuade Celia.

“If Celia sleeps with us, I won’t turn into spirit form. It’s no fair for only Celia to be in a material form,” Aishia said without missing a beat.

“N-No no no... Are you sure, Professor? I feel like this might be the worst possible situation I can think of?!” Rio questioned in a panic.

“Uhh... I-I don’t care if it is! Geez!” Celia said unflinchingly.

“W-Why?” Rio asked in shock.

“Then it’s decided. Let’s go.” Aishia pulled Rio’s arm once more.

In the end, the three of them decided to sleep together on their first night of cohabitation.



The three of them headed toward Rio’s bedroom.

“Good night, then.”

On the giant bed custom-crafted by Dominic, Aishia, Rio, and Celia settled down next to each other. Even with the three of them, there was still plenty of empty space on the bed.

After saying good night to each other, Rio and Celia lay in nervous silence. Meanwhile, as for Aishia...

“Zzz... zzz...”

She was sound asleep and breathing peacefully within several minutes, still in her material form as she said she would be.

Celia timidly sat up. “T-That girl really just wanted to go to sleep quickly...” she said as she looked at Aishia’s face, half-exasperated and half-impressed.

“Ahaha, that’s why I told you. We don’t do anything weird. Do you want to sleep in a separate room now?” Rio said with a faint smile, giving Celia an out.

“N-No.” Celia pouted delicately and shook her head.

“Umm, you don’t have to be so worried. Almost nothing problematic ever happens.”

“Almost?” Celia said, staring.

“N-No, I mean, nothing ever happens.” Rio rescinded his statement with an oddly high-pitched voice. He couldn’t tell her that sometimes, Aishia would materialize half-asleep and naked.

“I-I’m not worried anymore. It seems like this girl is a bit airheaded, and I do trust you...” Celia began to say, slightly sulking.

“...Then, why?” Rio asked, hesitantly prodding for what was really on Celia’s mind.

Celia blushed, turned away, and spoke. “B-Because... It’s I-lonely having to sleep all by myself when the two of you are sleeping t-together under the same roof.”

“...I see.” Rio couldn’t help but relax and smile with amusement.

“Ah, you laughed!” Celia pouted further.

“I’m sorry,” Rio apologized with a chuckle.

“Geez. It’s no laughing matter to me, you know?”

“Is that so?” Rio asked, looking up at Celia’s face.

“...Yeah.” Celia nodded nervously. Her face darkened with anxiety. “B-Because if everything had gone according to the original plan, I would have been in that person’s bed around this time.”

“Professor...” With an indescribable expression, Rio looked at Celia’s face. The person she was referring to was undoubtedly Charles Arbor.

“It scares me to imagine that this happiness right now might just be a dream I have to wake up from. That’s why, for today... at least for tonight, I’d like you to let me sleep beside you like this, Rio. When I wake up in the morning, I’d like to see your face first and be reassured...” Celia said, clutching onto Rio’s pajamas tightly.

“...It’s okay, this isn’t a dream. If it were a dream, then I’d just come save you again, no matter how many times it takes,” Rio promised with determination, squeezing Celia’s hand.

“Rio...” Celia teared up. The two stared at each other for a moment.

“Now, then. If you’re feeling better, shall we get to sleep soon? We’re going to have an early morning tomorrow.” Rio smiled gently.

Celia also smiled as she nodded, lying back down once more. “...Okay. You’re right. Now that I feel better, I suddenly feel very sleepy. If we talk too much, we might wake Aishia up too... Good night, Rio.”

“Yep. Good night, Professor,” Rio whispered softly into Celia’s ear.





The next morning...

“Nghuh...” Celia was the first to wake up. She blinked her eyes open to see Rio’s sleeping face right in front of her.

“?!” Celia started with a shake. *Ah, that’s right, I said I’d sleep with Rio last night...* She immediately remembered the series of events that led to this situation and slowly relaxed. Rio was breathing peacefully in his sleep. On his other side, Aishia appeared to be sleeping, too.

“Fufu...” Celia giggled with amusement and gently reached a hand toward Rio’s cheek. She was afraid he would wake up if she touched him, so she stopped a hair’s breadth away from making contact.

Warm.

Rio’s warmth could be felt, making her realize anew that this wasn’t a dream, much to her relief. Rio’s body seemed to twitch for a moment.

“Thank you, Rio,” Celia said. “If there’s anything I can do to pay you back, I’ll do anything. Just say the word,” she muttered quietly.

After that, with a small sigh, Celia closed her eyes once more and gave in to her sleepiness. The idea of continuing to stare at Rio’s face was tempting, but right now, she felt like she could get some decent rest. Sure enough, Celia fell into a peaceful sleep minutes later, her breathing coming out in soft wisps.

I guess she fell asleep, huh? Rio opened his eyes hesitantly, checking Celia’s sleeping face and smiling gently.

Interlude: Playing in the Water!

Meanwhile, at another time in a different location...

Before lunchtime, in the square of the spirit folk village, Masato, Aki, Arslan, Vera, and Latifa — as well as the other children of the village — were playing tag together.

“Masato’s it!”

“Wah, run away!”

But it wasn’t to be dismissed as a mere children’s game; the village children had enhanced their bodies with spirit arts and were running around at a tremendous speed.

“...Seven, eight, nine, ten! Okay — ready or not, here I come!” Masato counted to ten seconds before looking around the square.

There, a short distance away, Vera laughed happily as she clapped her hands, provoking Masato. “Haha! You can’t catch me!”

“Hey hey, Masato! I’m over here!” Arslan yelled over at Masato with a smug expression.

“Ha! Here I come!” Masato said with a combative grin, making a show of chasing Vera before chasing Arslan, too. His movement speed surpassed the limits of a regular human.

“Oh, you’re finally here!”

Masato’s secret lay in the armband he was wearing. It was a magic artifact imbued with a slightly less powerful body enhancement sorcery that Masato and Aki used, since they couldn’t use spirit arts.

It was a type of artifact that, while it required a little essence control in order to use it and it couldn’t stand up against Arslan and Vera’s natural werebeast abilities, Masato was able to put out the same speeds as the other village children. Because of that speed, it felt much more fun than a regular game of

tag — Masato was completely enraptured by the charms of this world's tag.

“Hehehe, you’ve finally started using that artifact to its full potential. That’s a nice speed you’re going at.” Arslan moved to a corner of the square and climbed a tree with light movements, looking down at Masato, who chased him from behind.

“That’s because I’m training everyday! Today’s the day I’ll finally catch you!” Masato stopped at the foot of the tree and looked up at Arslan with a wicked grin.

“Heh. You’re fifty years too early to be thinking about catching me!” Arslan said, jumping over to the next tree. He continued to jump from tree to tree, moving nimbly. Masato slowly followed behind him, looking up above.

“Later!” Arslan grinned and jumped down from the tree.

“Ah, wait!” Masato suddenly burst into a dash towards where Arslan had landed. However, Arslan’s destination had been a spring directly connected to the square.

“Whoo!” Arslan landed smoothly on the surface of the water. The water splashed outwards everywhere, but he remained unsubmerged.

“Whoa!” Meanwhile, Masato fell into the water with quite a big splash.

“Hehehe.” Arslan splashed about as he walked on the surface of the water, looking down at Masato submerged in the water. Bubbles were rising up to the surface, but there was no sign of Masato coming back up.

“...Hah!” After a moment, Masato leaped out of the water with force, lunging to catch Arslan.

However, Arslan had already foreseen Masato’s plan, evading Masato’s hand with a graceful hop. “There you are!”

“Dammit!” Masato said in frustration.

“You kept looking upwards and failed to notice your surroundings, Masato,” Arslan advised with a smug face.

“If only I could walk on water too...” Masato muttered with envy.

“Hehe, top class spirit arts users don’t choose their battlefields. Well, I’m sure you’ll be able to walk on water with a few more years of training too, Masato. Your ability in spirit arts won’t improve if you keep relying on artifacts, so keep at it,” Arslan said boastfully.

“What are you doing lecturing others for?” Sara, the silver werewolf, appeared out of nowhere and spoke exasperatedly.

“O-Ooh?! Don’t scare me like that, Sara.” Arslan said, his whole body flinching. He hadn’t realized Sara was so close by.

“You keep at your training, too,” Sara giggled, walking over the water to where Masato and Arslan were.

“...Wow. When Sara walks across the water, it doesn’t splash everywhere like with Arslan,” Masato said with admiration. Unlike Arslan, who had walked over the water noisily, Sara’s footsteps on the water only sent out a small ripple instead of giant splashes.

“Huh? Hmm, but it splashes when I run,” Sara said, kicking the water before speeding up. The water snapped away sharply at the same time Sara vanished.

“O-Ooh!” Masato cheered. Sara stood still on the water a short distance away.

“D-Don’t steal the limelight from me, Sara.” Arslan pouted with slight embarrassment.

“Ahaha, sorry,” she apologized with a faint smile. “I came to get Masato. It’s time for lunch.”

“Oh, is it that time already?!” Masato’s expression brightened.

“Hurry up, Sara!” Vera, Latifa, and Aki had come to the bank of the spring and were calling for Sara.

“Okay, give me a minute! Ah, that’s right. I was thinking of going to the pools after lunch. Did you guys want to come too? It’s gotten warmer lately, and I want to try on my new swimsuit.”

Vera and the others looked at each other. “We’ll go!” they all responded happily.

“Ooh, I want to go too!”

“Me too!”

Masato and Arslan also raised their hands enthusiastically.

“Sure, but you know the pools are separated by gender, right?” It was almost as though Sara was asking, *Do you still want to come?* The pools in the village were split into men’s, women’s, and one for families.

Masato and Arslan looked at each other. “Y-Yeah...”

They both nodded, their shoulders slightly lower than before.



Shortly after lunch...

“It’s pool time!” Vera, the werewolf, cheered cutely. She ran towards the pool fully intent on leaping in, holding onto Latifa and Aki in each hand as she did.

“Aaah! Wait, Vera!” Aki followed, voice muddled with confusion.

“Ahaha, there’s no stopping Vera when she’s like this.” Latifa laughed merrily.

“Get ready, you two! One, two, jump!” Vera tugged the two girls on each side of her closer and took a huge leap; the swimsuit-clad girls were soaring through the air, with Vera in the lead. They landed in the water with a splash.

“Pwah!” After a moment, the three all surfaced at once, gasping deeply for fresh air.

“Puhah! That felt good!” Vera laughed happily, shaking her head from side to side. The countless water droplets on her trademark wolf ears went scattering everywhere.

“Geez, Vera. That’s cold.” Aki turned her face away while laughing happily, guarding herself against the onslaught of water droplets.

“Ehehe. But it feels nice.” Latifa simply closed her eyes as she accepted those water droplets. Her ears twitched and vibrated with joy.

“Did you girls get in already? You know, just because no one else is around doesn’t mean you can skip your warm up stretches, right?” Sara arrived at the pool behind Vera and the others, glaring down at the girls already in the water

questioningly. Behind her were Miharuru, Orphia, and Alma.

“O-Of course, we did it on our way here. N-Now, it’s time for a battle! Let’s go, Aki, Latifa!” Vera said shamelessly, wading through the water with a breaststroke.

“We made sure to do it! Don’t worry, Sara!” Latifa yelled back, following Vera.

“Ahaha, Vera’s just a little rash at times,” Aki muttered with a faint smile. Bringing up the rear, Sara sighed tiredly,

“Geez, that’s so suspicious.”

“Fufu, we should stretch and get in, too. This is such a wonderful place to swim in, after all.” Miharuru laughed in amusement, a childish look in her eye as she spoke.

The girls were in a half-cavern spring that the dwarves had remodeled into a natural pool. Trees grew all around the surrounding area, and the water was beautifully clear, illuminated by the sparkling sunlight shining through the gaps of the ceiling. It was a very fantasy-like space, freeing even Miharuru from her usual sisterly responsibilities and allowing her to feel excited.

“You’re right.” Alma the elder dwarf giggled and nodded before beginning to stretch.

“Fufu, then me, too. One, two, three, four...” The high elf Orphia bent and flexed her limbs.

“Okay!” Miharuru began her warm up exercises, too, prompting Sara to imitate her and the others.

...Hmph, Miharuru’s figure really is great. Orphia’s isn’t bad, too. Alma’s shorter than me, yet I feel her chest size isn’t that much different to mine... Sara grumbled to herself as she observed the other girls’ bodies. She had gone bathing with the girls present before, but seeing them in their swimsuits like this had a different charm compared to seeing them naked.

“What is it, Sara?” Alma asked, noticing her gaze.

“N-No, it’s nothing. I won’t lose!” Sara shook her head and squeaked, clenching her fists to encourage herself.

“Hm? Well, whatever. These swimsuits based on the design of the swimsuit Miharu brought are very comfortable to wear. The fact that there’s as much skin exposed as wearing underwear bothers me a little, but it’s cute and easy to move around in the water.” Alma cocked her head curiously before twisting her body around to see her own swimsuit.

The swimsuits the girls were wearing right now were made in the village and based off the design of the swimsuit Miharu bought at the Ricca Guild. Their designs were all very modern and cute.

“Yeah. But it’s a little too embarrassing to wear in front of boys. It’s good that we have gender-designated pools,” Orphia agreed with a giggle.

Until now, the swimsuits available in the village for women only consisted of a loose white underrobe that also served as a bathrobe, so the amount of skin exposure would be quite a shock before any male.

Miharu sensed the cultural difference and started to speak in amusement. “Fufu, in the world we were in, we’d wear these swimsuits to shared spaces between boys and girls.”

“...Isn’t it embarrassing?” Sara asked seriously, looking at Miharu.

“Hmm... I guess I kind of felt like that? That’s why I never went to play in those kinds of places after I got older... But there are lots of people that don’t mind that kind of thing, I think?” Miharu replied with a shy smile, tilting her head.

“I see, so Miharu finds it embarrassing... Well, you don’t have to worry about the opposite gender here, so let’s swim to our heart’s content. This should be enough warm ups for now,” Sara suggested.

“Come on! Aren’t you getting in yet?! Let’s play together!” Latifa waved her arm from the water.

“All right, we’re coming!” Sara replied on behalf of the others.

They enjoyed themselves for two full hours with breaks in between and returned home before sun down. Then, as they were changing back in the changing rooms, Latifa spoke up with a giggle.

“When Onii-chan gets back, let’s do that again! I want to show him my swimsuit figure!” she said with a carefree smile on her face.

“Huh?!” the other girls said with shocked expressions.

Chapter 3: Shopping

The morning after Rio had spent his first night with Celia and Aishia...

After finishing their breakfast, Rio and the others headed towards Amande. Their destination was the headquarters of the Ricca Guild in order to purchase daily necessities for Celia.

The stores all over the city had begun their business at a rather early hour of the morning, filling the roads with a lively crowd of merchants and customers.

“This is Amande. Like you’ve heard, it’s a very busy and bustling city.”

From under her hooded cloak, Celia looked at all the stalls lining the road with great interest in her eyes.

“First, let’s go buy you clothes at the Ricca Guild. Professor, make sure you don’t get separated...” Rio suggested.

“Let’s hold hands.” Aishia grabbed Rio’s left hand with complete familiarity.

“...I see. Then, may I hold your right hand?” Celia glanced up at Rio’s face and sought his permission shyly.

“Of course. Please, allow me.” Rio nodded readily, taking Celia by the hand.

“Y-Yeah...” *H-He seems quite used to this*, Celia thought to herself with a start, squeezing Rio’s hand nervously in return.

After that, the three weaved their way through the crowds and made their way to the Ricca Guild’s store — it was the branch that specialized in women’s clothing that he had taken Miharuru to before. Celia’s heart was leaping at the thought of going shopping for the first time in a while, her steps springy with happiness.

When they stopped in front of the building. Rio turned to address the two girls. “Okay. I’m going to go a different way for a while. If you need anything, just tell Aishia — I’ll return right away with our telepathic connection.”

“Got it. See you, Haruto.” Celia nodded cheerfully, using Rio’s alias out loud.

They had decided in advance that they would call Rio “Haruto” while outside in public, where other people could possibly overhear them, since Rio’s arrest warrant was still active, even now.

“Take care of Cecilia, Aishia,” Rio said, using Celia’s alias.

Since Celia was also technically abducted to the public, she couldn’t afford to walk around without some form of disguise, either — hence the use of an alias. On top of that, Celia’s silver hair had also been changed to blonde with the same artifact that Rio used to change his hair.

“Leave it to me.” Aishia nodded quietly but firmly.

“I will. See you later.” Rio nodded contently, turning on his heel.

After he had disappeared into the crowds, Celia lowered the hood of her cloak and turned to Aishia. “Let’s go inside, shall we?”

“Okay.” Aishia nodded, lowering her hood, too. The two of them entered through the doors.

“Now, let’s start from the first floor and make our way up. Will you help me choose, Aishia?” Celia said to Aishia in a lively voice.

“Sure,” Aishia agreed readily.

Thus, the two began their long shopping spree. Like Celia had declared, they went through each floor in order. The building had four floors total: the first through the third were for clothes and small accessories, while the fourth was entirely dedicated to lingerie.

“Oh, there’s so much variety to the Ricca Guild’s clothing. The real thing really is different. Everything catches my eye.” Celia giggled, choosing clothes from everywhere.

She was comparatively more of the secluded type, but when it came to shopping, she would pick clothes she liked with skilled hands. Furthermore, she also wasn’t wasteful, so she checked every price tag carefully as she went.

The two beautiful girls clearly stood out, drawing the attention of the store attendants and other customers.

“How about this?” Celia showed each piece to Aishia one by one, seeking her

opinion. In return, Aishia gave precise advice with consideration for Rio's tastes in mind.

"Haruto would like the other one better."

If Rio were here, he probably would have asked "How do you know my preferences?" with a twitch in his smile. "I see, I see. I think I'm starting to get a good idea of Haruto's tastes. I'll keep this one instead, then." Celia nodded with satisfaction.

After that they moved to the next floor and chose several good-looking pieces, then headed to the fourth floor to choose underwear. "Okay, now that I've noted all the regular clothes I want, let's go to the lingerie section first."

Celia climbed the stairs happily, but she stopped mid-step.

"...H-Hey... You wouldn't happen to know Haruto's taste in underwear too, right?" she asked fearfully.

"I don't. We've never selected underwear together." Aishia shook her head quietly.

The reason why she was so knowledgeable of Rio's tastes was now clear: the second time they had come shopping here with Miharuru, they had actually went clothes shopping together. Aishia clearly remembered Rio's comments from when Miharuru asked him for his opinion.

"I-I see..." Celia sighed in relief. She felt an indescribable mix of relief and disappointment.

"But..." Aishia murmured. Celia froze, on high alert.

"Huh?"

"He probably doesn't like them to be too flashy," Aishia predicted, making Celia gulp.

"...W-Why?"

"Based on his clothing preference."

"A-Ah. Well, that's true... O-Okay then, fine. Let's choose some," Celia agreed with her heart racing in her chest, hurrying up the stairs with quick steps. Aishia

silently followed her.

“Wow, there’s so much variety here. The Beltrum branch had a low number of selections and always sold out. With all of this, someone fla-... someone my size should be able to find underwear, too.” Celia’s eyes sparkled with a burning fire as they stepped into the lingerie shop.

“You can choose anything you want — That’s why Haruto brought you here.” Aishia explained.

In reality, the products by the Ricca Guild — especially the items for women — were of such a good quality, the products by other merchants couldn’t hope to compare.

And so, with approval from Miharuru, Aki, and Masato, Rio held the ironclad belief that if one was to go shopping in the Strahl region, then it had to be at Amande.

After Miharuru and the others learned to read and write, they had noticed how some Japanese names were mixed in among the products of the Ricca Guild’s stock. There was quite a bit of mystery there for them, but that was a story for another time.

“Fufu... Then I’ll have to be more grateful towards Haruto. Now, let’s pick some right away. We can start buying some good underwear.” Celia seemed extremely happy as she started to select underwear with a beaming smile. With light footsteps, she scoured high and low for lingerie, Aishia in tow.

“Thank you for your continued patronage. If you require any assistance or would like to have your companion’s size measured, please let me know,” a shop attendant offered, bowing her head at Aishia.

“Oh, then may I take you up on that offer? But wow, you come here often enough to be remembered?” Celia accepted the attendant’s offer before turning to Aishia.

“I’ve only been here twice,” Aishia replied.

“You’re so beautiful, you left an especially strong impression, Miss. The company you had last time was beautiful too, and you’ve brought another beauty along today,” the attendant added with a smile, looking at Celia.

Celia smiled shyly. “Ahaha, I see. Thank you for the compliment,” she said politely.

“We’re here to buy her underwear today, so I’m fine,” Aishia said to the attendant, getting her to measure Celia’s size.

“Understood. Then, shall we get to measuring right away?”

“Yes, please do.” Thus, Celia had her body measurements taken by the store attendant.

“Now, please come this way.” After being led to a private room that also acted as a changing room, Celia’s stripped down to her underwear and had her chest size measured.

“Your skin is very beautiful. You have such a lovely figure, too — I am most envious as another woman.” The attendant stared at Celia’s skin raptly as she measured her.

“Ahaha, it’s just a childish stature,” Celia said with a self-deprecating grimace, making the attendant shake her head firmly.

“That’s not true. You may have a petite body, but you also have curves where it matters. It’s a very feminine body shape.”

“...Ahaha, thanks.” Celia smiled uncomfortably.

After that, the size measurements wrapped up quickly and Celia was able to try on several attractive pieces of underwear.



Meanwhile, Rio moved about on his own, gathering information from the inner city.

His goal was information about the heroes who could be the friends and family of Miharū, Aki, and Masato, but he was also looking for the whereabouts of Lucius, the mercenary who murdered his mother. He walked around the market, visiting inns that were open for lunch and chatting up shopkeepers as he ordered.

It’s no different from last time. The heroes, that man... There’s no new information circulating... Rio left the inn he was gathering information at and

sighed quietly. According to what Celia had told him, the Galarc Kingdom also had a spirit stone that could summon a hero, but there was still no identifying information about that hero as of yet. The only things circulating were witness accounts of what was most likely the pillar of light that occurred during a summoning rising from the Galarc castle. It was possible that different kingdoms controlled the flow of information differently, Rio guessed.

If it's come to this, then maybe I should sneak into the castle of each kingdom? It isn't impossible with Aishia's cooperation, but... it's a little risky. The situation was very different compared to Celia's case, after all.

I'll need connections to try the head-on approach... And it has to be that of a rather powerful noble. Though there'd still be risks...

The head-on approach seemed like it'd be a headache, too — after all, he had already experienced the mess that was royal and noble society first hand.

Rio pondered and pondered, ending with a great sigh. *For now, my first goal is to confirm the full names of all the heroes across the kingdoms. If I can find that by gathering information in town, fine. Even if I have to sneak into the castle, I mustn't be greedy. Direct contact should be left as a second priority goal. As long as I can gather their existence and location, at the very least...*

He decided to think about how to approach them another time. It was only delaying the issue until later, but there was time.

In any case, he had to consider living with Celia from now on, too. Although he had promised to teach her various things about sorcery and spirit arts, he at least didn't have to teach her a language like he had with his Japanese guests.

All that was left was —

Lucius...

Rio recalled his vow to avenge his mother and grit his teeth. This man was probably a more difficult task to deal with than handling Miharuru, Aki, and Masato.

I've got as far as how he became the leader of a famous mercenary squad as an adventurer, but his name hasn't come up at all in recent years. The mercenary squad he was affiliated with — the “Lions of the Sky” — was widely

known in certain regions of the Strahl region, but there was absolutely no information as to where he was located.

Is he dead?

When Rio imagined it, an indescribable emotion rose within him, making him frown.

He didn't care if he was dead, but Rio's resentment wasn't so shallow that he could accept his life or death status as unknown. The flames of revenge that burned quietly in the depths of his heart had yet to extinguish, even with his reunion with Miharuru and Celia.

Rio squeezed his hand into a fist.

...I should look into it a little further.

He quieted his heart with a deep breath and started walking again.



Roughly one hour later, Rio was done gathering information and now stood next to Aishia in front of a changing room on the second floor of the Ricca Guild.

"Hey, what do you think?" Celia twirled around in front of Rio and Aishia, wearing the clothes she was trying on. The hem of the skirt fluttered softly.



Rio's eyes widened. "...I think it really suits you. It has some vague resemblance to the clothes sorcerers prefer to wear, I think?" He was referring to the traditional fashion that sorcerers wore to proudly display their status.

"Right? That's exactly it. These are clothes made for sorcerers, so I thought it was cute. It's also made from excellent fabric that can be used as travel gear, too, you know? Aishia chose this one as well," Celia said, giggling happily.

"Cecilia is a sorceress, after all. I think it really suits you."

"R-Really? Thank you. Then this is the first one I've decided on. Will you look at the second one with me, too?"

"Sure." Rio agreed.

Thus, Celia's fashion show at the changing room commenced. All the clothes Celia had selected were trim and cute, all drawing positive reactions from Rio — exactly as Aishia had declared they would — making the comment "I think it's wonderful" fall repeatedly from Rio's mouth.

"What about this?" Celia asked several outfits later. "That looks good. I think it's wonderful," Rio said pleasantly.

"...Geez, I'm happy to hear your compliment, but you're always saying the same thing." Celia glared at him and pouted her lips.

"Ahaha, sorry. I don't really understand clothes, but I think you have a great fashion sense. I think you'll look cute in anything you wear, Cecilia," Rio said without any shame at all, scratching at his head awkwardly.

"Wha..." Caught off guard, Celia couldn't help but turn red.

"...Cecilia, are you embarrassed?" Aishia asked, watching Celia's expression.

"I-I'm not embarrassed!" Celia said in a fluster.

"N-Now now, can you show me your next selection, Cecilia?" Rio soothed Celia to avoid causing trouble for the store and urged her to continue the fashion show with a strained smile.

"O-Okay." Celia nodded with a blush on her cheeks, quickly dragging the curtains of the changing room shut.



Some time later, Rio and the girls wrapped up their shopping and visited a high-class restaurant of the Ricca Guild to have lunch. The time was a little after the peak time for lunch, so they were led to a table without waiting too long.

“I’m sorry. I made you buy more than I planned...” Celia hesitantly bowed her head from where she sat opposite to Rio. Their shopping spree had ended when Celia had been pondering between her many remaining options, whereupon Rio had simply decided to buy the rest for her.

“No, don’t worry about it. There weren’t that many in the end, and they were all daily necessities that you needed, no?” Rio shook his head easily.

“But... It was fairly expensive.” Since she had looked at each individual price tag, she had a general idea of how much the total was. Even if Celia was still working at the academy, she would have hesitated before a total like that.

“It’s okay. I’ve earned more money than I can spend from selling monster materials and enchanted gems.” In reality, whenever Rio had the time, he would train and obtain food by hunting beasts and monsters, so his pockets were surprisingly deeper than your average noble.

“...You really aren’t pushing yourself?” Celia stared at Rio’s face as she asked.

“Of course not.” Rio nodded casually.

“...All right. Then, thank you.” Celia sighed quietly. She decided in her head that she would repay him for this debt properly, but didn’t say it out loud since he would probably refuse her.

“Now, setting that aside, how about we order the lunch course?” Rio asked, immediately changing the subject.

“Yeah. I’ll leave it to you, Ri... I mean, Haruto.” Celia nodded and almost said Rio, before correcting herself to Haruto. She was still in danger of calling him by his real name when she let her guard down.

“You okay with that, too, Aishia?” Rio asked with a faint smile.

“Yup. I’ll leave it to you.” Aishia nodded.

After that, they gave their order to the waiter and had an hors d’oeuvre

carried over to them shortly afterwards, signaling the beginning of their enjoyable lunchtime. As the three of them chatted peacefully, the waiters brought over salad, soup, bread, pasta, and meat dishes in that order, making the time pass with lots of fun.

“What did you think of this restaurant?” Rio asked after dessert. He had asked for Celia’s thoughts during the rest of the meal, too, but he asked her again. “Yeah, it was good. Every dish was delicious, and the pasta really had that local specialty taste to it. I’d probably visit often if we had a restaurant like this in Beltrum’s capital, but...” Celia gave her satisfied opinion, but showed a look of contemplation towards the end.

“But?” Rio asked.

“The food you cooked for us yesterday tasted better, I think,” Celia said with a shy grin.

Rio’s eyes widened, as he was taken by surprise. “...Thank you very much,” he thanked her embarrassedly.

Celia watched Rio’s reaction and smiled happily, this time changing the topic to one from the past. “Come to think of it, during your school days you would make light snacks and bring them to the research lab. You’re pretty good at cooking, right Haruto?”

“I don’t know if I’m good or not, but it’s thanks to my memories of my past life. I was living alone and cooking for myself for a long time, so I remembered tons of recipes,” Rio said humbly.

“Ah, I see... The food for Beltrum nobility is all so unimaginative; every flavor is seasoned so strongly, so it gets boring easily. But... your cooking had a delicate flavor to it. There were some foods I’ve never eaten before yesterday — did they include some of your recipes...?” Celia asked.

“Yes, there are recipes that don’t exist in this world that I tried to make with the ingredients of this world. There’s a food that’s similar to pasta... Would you like me to try and make that?” Rio concealed the fact that pasta was an Earth-made product and offered to cook for Celia.

“Really?! Pasta was a boom in Beltrum for a while, but everyone got bored of

it. It's been a while since I last ate it." Celia beamed happily; it seemed like the pasta they ate at this restaurant just now had raised her expectations.

"Then, I'll make it tonight."

Celia nodded with joy. "Okay, I look forward to it! Oh, is it okay if I watch you make it?"

"Hm? Sure, I don't mind... but it isn't very interesting to watch, you know."

"No, I want to learn how to cook, too. I would feel bad making you cook everything for me, and I'd like to let you eat some of my cooking as a form of thanks, too..." Celia said embarrassedly. She had been considering what she was capable of doing for Rio's sake.

For the record, it was a very rare event for a high-class noble daughter to cook.

"...If that's the case, then I'd be happy to. I'd like to try your cooking, too."

Rio imagined Celia in an apron and couldn't help but turn his mouth up in a smile. It actually suited her quite well.

"Y-Yeah. I'll have to end up relying on you to learn how to make it, but please teach me," Celia requested, peering up at Rio's face nervously.

Chapter 4: Infiltrating the Claire Estate

That same day, after returning to the stone house, Celia shut herself in her allocated room and began to write a letter. The addressee was, of course, her family.

As she painfully pondered over how much she should say and what to write other than informing them of her safety, the contents of the letter gradually progressed. Several hours after she began writing, a letter with an acceptable amount of content recorded in it was completed.

She wanted to sleep over it for a night before proofreading, but for now, she read over it again to make sure there weren't any glaring problems.

"...It's done."

Celia breathed deeply and put her quill down on the desk. She stretched her arms and stood up from the chair, heading for the door. When she opened the door and moved to the living room, Rio and Aishia were sitting on the sofa, chatting. The two of them immediately noticed Celia's presence.

"Did you finish writing your letter, Professor?" Rio asked Celia. She nodded.

"Yup, for now. I'd like you to read it to make sure there's no issues with the contents..." she said timidly.

"Sure, I don't mind doing that."

"Thanks. Here you go."

Rio accepted the letter from Celia and ran his eyes over the text. "Your writing is as neat as expected, Professor," he said, breaking into a smile.

"G-Geez. Don't look at that... Are there any problems with the contents?" Celia asked with red cheeks.

"...No, nothing I'm seeing. It's a very warm letter."

"I-I see. Thank you." Celia accepted the letter with embarrassment.

“We were actually just discussing the journey to Count Claire’s territory. I was thinking of setting up base in the outskirts of Amande for a while and departing the day after tomorrow, but there’s somewhere I’d like to stop by on our way back,” Rio said.

“I don’t mind. Where do you want to go?” Celia asked.

“Marquess Rodan’s territory — the capital of Rodania.”

“The headquarters of the Duke Huguenot faction, which has Princess Flora right now... You’re going to check on the background of the hero that was summoned, aren’t you?” Celia asked, immediately making a guess as to why Rio was heading for Rodania.

“I’m glad you’re quick on the uptake.” Rio grinned widely and nodded.

Yesterday, he had heard from Celia that there were four kingdoms that had sacred stones which summoned heroes: One in the Kingdom of Beltrum, one with the Huguenot faction that had been exiled from Beltrum, one in the Kingdom of Galarc, and one in the kingdom of Centostella. Out of these four, the only one whose name had been identified was the hero of the Beltrum Kingdom, Rui Shigekura. Thus, Rio was considering confirming the name of the hero from the Huguenot faction on their way to Count Claire’s territory.

“I’m sure there’s no need for me to say anything to the two of you, but be careful, okay?” Celia said, timidly peering at Rio and Aishia’s faces.

“We will. For now, our goal is to simply confirm the hero’s name, so we won’t do anything too dangerous,” Rio agreed readily, trying not to worry Celia.

“...In other words, you won’t approach the Rodania hero even if they turn out to be the hero you’re looking for?”

“If that turns out to be the case, I’ll make a careful decision based on the situation of their security. I don’t know if they’ll be willing to listen to the words of an intruder appearing out of nowhere, and if the worst happens and a battle occurs, I don’t know what kind of abilities the hero might be hiding. They’re a complete unknown.” It wasn’t as though he was visiting an acquaintance, so he wasn’t about to go looking for trouble.

“The hero’s abilities, huh? You might know this already, but there’s a legend...

That they had Divine Arms of the gods and could defeat a demon army of several thousand in a single blow. Or so it's said," Celia said.

"...Did the hero summoned in Beltrum's castle, Rui Shigekura, have a power like the legends?" Rio asked curiously. A legend was just a legend — there was no guarantee it was true. However, heroes of legend were actually appearing in the present, so it wasn't impossible to find out.

"I don't know the details, but he did have a Divine Arms. In Rui Shigekura's case, his took the shape of a weapon — a bow. One that can control lightning, or something."

"Divine Arms in the form of a lightning bow..." Rio muttered quietly.

Don't tell me the attack he launched that time was...

Something familiar came to Rio's mind. When he was acting as a diversion for Celia to safely escape the capital, the boy had fired a shot at him from the top of a steeple.

"Is something the matter?" Celia looked at Rio's face curiously.

Rio shook his head. "No. Did that Divine Arms really have the power to defeat a huge demon army, like you said?" he asked. He didn't want to say that he had possibly crossed swords with the hero, since Celia would just worry.

"I don't know. Even if he could release a shot with that much power, it isn't something you can use just anywhere..."

"Well, that's true," Rio accepted with a wry smile. At worst, the landscape could change.

"Yeah, but..." Celia paused with a frown, causing Rio to urge her to continue.

"But?"

"Do you remember how I was developing an artifact that could measure the essence stored inside a person?" Celia suddenly changed the topic with a question for Rio.

"Of course."

"I actually succeeded not too long ago."

Rio's eyes widened. "...Congratulations. That's amazing... quite a historic achievement."

The development of a magic artifact that could measure the amount of essence within a person was a challenge that had yet to be accomplished, until now.

Celia shyly burst into a wide smile before immediately looking troubled and continuing her story. "Thank you. Because of that, I actually used that artifact to measure the magic essence of the hero and his friends that were summoned along with him..."

"How was the result?" Rio asked with a serious expression, matching the mood of her story with his own enthusiasm.

"...They all had so much essence, it was immeasurable. The artifact broke. Even though I made it capable of measuring up to ten times the amount of essence required to use wide-scale annihilation magic of the highest grade..." Celia said with a conflicted look.

The type of magic she had brought up referred to the super-powerful grand magic that was mainly developed with war in mind. If used in a crowded area, it had enough power to take the lives of several hundred people. However, on top of the compatibility rate of the spell formula contract being low, it also exhausted a ridiculous amount of magic essence, requiring more essence than the average sorcerer could use.

"I see. Not only the hero, but his friends were also unable to be measured in essence..." In that case, Miharuru and the others might have quite the amount of essence too, Rio thought.

"I've never seen wide-scale annihilation magic used before. Is it as much as your essence, Professor?" Rio asked about Celia's essence amount to gain an idea of how much a genius sorcerer would have.

"Without any essence recovery potions, I can cast it twice, at most. Just so you know, I'm the sorcerer with the most magic essence in the Beltrum Kingdom, okay?" Celia sighed, answering with a bitter smile.

"So even for you, the limit is two..." Rio tapped his hand against his mouth in

contemplation.

“Haruto’s essence is limitless,” Aishia murmured quietly.

“...Really?” Celia’s eyes widened as she looked at Rio’s face inquisitively.

“No... I wonder? I’ve been told I have a lot, but I’ve never measured it properly.” Rio scratched his head, troubled.

“It’s an endless supply, so it’s limitless. If Celia’s essence was a single bucket of water, then Haruto’s essence is like an endlessly large lake that can never dry up. Miharuru, Aki, and Masato have lots, too, but not as much as Haruto,” Aishia said, using a metaphor to explain the scale of Rio’s magic essence.

“A-Ahaha... That’s incredible.” Celia’s smile twitched in spite of herself.

If that was the truth, then it was absurd for her to compare herself with him. The statement was slightly hard to believe, but despite their short time together, she knew Aishia wasn’t the type to lie without a reason to do so.

“...Huh? Wait a minute. Why do you know how much essence Rio has?” Celia suddenly questioned out loud, looking at Aishia.

“Spirits can tell how much magic essence a person has by diving into them. Haruto and I are connected by a spirit path, so I can read his essence amount more accurately than I can with others. Even so, I can’t see his limit.”

“...You mean even you can’t measure his essence amount accurately?” Celia confirmed timidly. Aishia gave a short nod.

“Yes.”

“Ahaha. Rather than talking about my magic essence, let’s talk about Rodania’s hero instead. And about the letter to deliver to your home, Professor.” Rio smiled wryly and redirected the wandering conversation back on track.

“...Right,” Celia agreed tiredly. “I have an idea with regards to the letter. There’s a hidden passageway from the back of the estate to the main house... If we use that, we should be able to place the letter and return without a problem.”

“I see. Then it seems like it’d be better to have you guide us into your home,

Professor.” Rio looked at Celia dependently.

“Yup, leave it to me,” Celia agreed proudly.

“Which only leaves the problem of sneaking into Rodania... Could you wait somewhere safe during that time, Professor?” Rio asked.

“Yeah. If something bad happens, I’d only get in the way anyway. If only I’d mastered the art of self defense...”

No matter how much magic she could use, Celia hadn’t trained for combat as a soldier. There was no guarantee she could launch offensive magic without hesitation against someone during a battle, and she was powerless in close-range combat. If someone closed in on her, she’d be no different than any other defenseless civilian.

Rio thought for a moment. “Would you like me to teach you some simple self defense? Of course, Aishia and I will be the ones protecting you normally, but there might be a use for it if we’re walking outside,” he suggested.

“...You’re right. It wouldn’t be good for me to stay shut inside, either. Would you, please?” Celia was more of the indoor type, but she agreed with his assessment.

“Then once we get back from Count Claire’s, we can start the lessons along with the ones on sorcery and spirit arts.”

Celia nodded. “Okay. You’ve also promised to teach me cooking. It’s like our roles have completely reversed... I was the teacher in the past, fufu,” she said, smiling in amusement.

“You’re still my Professor to me, even now.” Rio said, beaming cheerily.



Two days later, after lunch...

Rio carried Celia as he and Aishia flew through the air to visit the capital of Count Claire’s territory, Cleia.

Cleia was located towards the east of the Beltrum Kingdom, a regional city that the main road towards Galarc Kingdom passed through. It was Rio’s first time visiting.

With roughly 30,000 people, the regional city boasted a medium-sized population and functioned as an important trading point between the east and west sides of Beltrum.

Rio entered the city from the eastern side, holding hands with the two girls as they walked down the main road. “Since we’ll be sneaking into the estate at nighttime, how about we go somewhere before then?” Rio asked Celia, who was walking on his right side.

Cleia was Celia’s hometown; it was possible that she had memories that she wanted to revisit, Rio thought, but Celia shook her head.

“No, it’s okay. There may be people who know me, so I’m fine with just looking at the town like this,” she said. Her cloak hood covered her face and made it hard to see her expression, but she looked somewhat downcast to Rio.

“Let’s walk, then. I’m hungry. We should go eat something yummy.” From Rio’s left, Aishia looked at the two of them and pulled at Rio’s arm. She may have been trying to cheer Celia up in her own way.

“...Good idea. How about that, Professor? If there are any local specialties, we can go eat that.” Rio smiled faintly and tugged Celia along by the hand.

“Ah, wait! Hold on, you two.” Despite giving a verbal objection, Celia was smiling happily as she allowed the two to lead her forward.

Thus, time passed in the blink of an eye. As they walked around and tried different foods, twilight eventually settled upon the city.

At the moment, the three of them were drinking tea in a rather trendy cafe while taking a break. Sitting on the second floor terrace, they watched the people walking through the city with the sun setting behind them, eating their extra orders of dessert.

“I may have eaten a little too much after all,” Rio said with a strained smile, holding a hand against his stomach.

“Y-Yeah. It was delicious, but maybe this scone was a bit too much. There’s no way I’m eating dinner now. Ugh, I’ll have to go on a diet...” Celia agreed, hanging her head with guilt.

“It was good,” Aishia said. As a spirit, she could change her food intake into magic essence, so she could easily eat as much as she wanted without ever gaining weight.

“Just what kind of body does a spirit have? I’m so jealous...” Celia pouted, looking at Aishia.

“The materialization of a physical body from a spiritual existence is a spirit art unique to spirits alone. I don’t know if I have the organs necessary for human life to function, but my general structure and physical abilities shouldn’t vary too much from a normal human,” Aishia said, giving a rather serious answer unexpectedly. Celia was left taken aback in surprise.

“H-Huh... Really...”

“The more a spirit art causes a phenomena that goes against the laws of nature, the greater the essence consumed. Taking on the physical nature of a form may be the most natural way of materialization, I believe,” Rio explained, adding on his own assumption.

“That makes sense. Even in sorcery, phenomena that contradict nature’s laws will affect the essence consumption...” Celia murmured as she started to lose herself in her own thoughts. Figuring she wouldn’t be paying attention for a while, Rio smiled wryly.

“It’s almost getting dark,” Aishia said.

Rio thought for a moment. “...Let’s wait a little longer. There’re still lots of people on the streets, so at least wait until my stomach settles,” he laughed, deciding to extend their break time.



Nearly an hour passed after their visit to the cafe. With the exception of the main road, the streets were completely empty of people as Rio and the girls made their way to the Claire estate.

The estate sat at the top of a small hill, its interior lit by torches as soldiers patrolled the area. Any amateur would easily be discovered by the security measures; however, Rio and Aishia blended into the darkness as they flew with their spirit arts, landing in a corner of the estate without being spotted by

anyone.

“Do you think we can make it to the hidden passageway without being seen? If not, we can always try sneaking in from the rooftop instead...” Rio whispered, letting Celia down as he observed the state of the estate grounds from between the bushes.

“It’ll be fine — the entrance is located in an area hard to spot.”

“All right. Then please lead the way.”

“Okay. Follow me,” Celia nodded, bending down low as she began to move. Rio and Aishia brought up the rear while staying alert of the presence of any patrolling soldiers.

Roughly one minute later, they stopped moving. “It’s the fountain over there. The ground behind the estate is the entrance of the hidden passageway,” Celia said, pointing to a fountain on the outskirts of the garden.

“I see. It doesn’t seem like there are any patrols around, but just in case... May I hold you for a little while?” Rio asked, peering at the garden from the shadows.

“Huh...?” Celia stiffened out of bewilderment.

“There’s a chance we may be spotted while moving from here to that fountain, so I’d like to hide us with spirit arts just in case,” Rio explained.

“O-Ohh, that’s what you meant. Just like the spirit arts Aishia used when we were getting away from the capital, right? Sure, go ahead,” Celia said in understanding, having an idea of the spirit art that would be used. It seemed like Aishia had already used it on her once before, when Rio was acting as a diversion in the capital.

“If you don’t mind, then,” Rio said, picking Celia up in his arms. Then he turned to Aishia. “Let’s go, Aishia.”

“Okay. I’ll use the spirit arts, then.”

“Please do. Thank you, Aishia.”

“No worries,” Aishia said, activating her spirit arts. Immediately afterwards, a gentle breeze blew around them, completely enveloping Rio.

“Let’s go,” he said, walking forward. Aishia followed behind him.

“...Hey, Rio. You can see your surroundings, right?” Celia asked quietly, still being carried. She couldn’t see their surroundings at all — it was as though there was a thick fog in the air, distorting the space.

“Yes. If you train yourself to visualize magic essence, you’d be able to see, too, Professor,” Rio explained.

The spirit art Aishia was currently using was a wind-based invisibility illusion that weaved her magic essence into the surrounding air. It created a unique space that caused those within the space to appear transparent to the outside. Unlike with turning into spirit form, their physical bodies were still present, so it wasn’t possible to shut sounds and presences out, too. Furthermore, exterior interference and contact could easily shake the space, so they weren’t able to make any sudden or vigorous movements, like running and jumping.

Other than that, people who could visualize essence could see through the spirit art’s activation and view the interior of the space, while people with high sensitivity for detecting magic essence could also feel the displacement, so there was a limit to its use.

That being said, barely any humans in the Strahl region could visually detect magic essence, so it was a worthwhile ability to use.

Thus, they blended in with the surroundings and moved towards the fountain.

“Aishia, the splashing water will make the space shake. You can undo it now,” Rio said.

“Okay.” After Aishia undid the spirit art, Celia’s vision returned to normal.

“Just in case a guard comes, I’ll leave you to unlock the entrance, Professor.”

Prompted by Rio, Celia immediately began searching around the floor. “Leave it to me. It should be around here...”

Then, after a moment, Celia discovered the entrance to the hidden passageway. “Here it is!”

She moved her hands and pressed against the stone tiles on the ground, moving it towards the side like a sliding door. However, Celia lacked the

strength to move the stone tile easily.

“Let me help. I just have to pull it this way, right?” Rio asked, promptly offering to assist her.

“Yeah, thank you...” No sooner than Celia had nodded, Rio was lightly moving the stone tile to the side, revealing the hidden stairway down to the house.

“I’m going to close it,” Rio said as they headed down.

“Yes, please. I’ll just light the place...” As Rio closed the entrance back up, Celia fiddled with the magic artifacts in the underground corridor to give the passageway light.

“Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

They headed down the passageway; at the end of the long and narrow corridor was a wide, open space. It was probably directly below or very close to the house.

“I’m lighting the lanterns,” Celia said, activating the artifacts in the room. The lights on the ceiling immediately lit up, illuminating the space. Directly opposite the corridor from the fountain was a set of stairs leading up to the upper floors; it was lined with several doors on either side.

“It’s very spacious,” Rio noted, looking around the room curiously.

“No one other than my family comes here, so don’t worry. The doors on the left and right lead to the kitchen, bedrooms, and emergency living spaces. The stairs directly before us lead to the house, exiting at father and mother’s bedroom,” Celia said, explaining the structure of the underground room to Rio.

“I see. Then shall I leave your letter in your parents’ room? If they’re present, then we can also possibly arrange for you to meet them...” Rio asked, observing Celia’s expression.

“...No, don’t. The two of them should be in the capital right now. Mother regularly cleans this place out, so you can leave it here instead. The servants sometimes go into the bedroom, too.” Celia shook her head and took the letter out of the pocket of her cloak.

“...I understand.” Rio was about to suggest they wait around until her parents returned, but he swallowed his words and agreed instead. It was possible that Celia hadn’t completely organized her feelings yet, after all.

“Thank you, Rio.” Celia smiled softly.

“No problem. Let’s come see them some other time.”

We definitely will, Rio vowed to himself and returned Celia’s smile.

Interlude: Behind the Departure...

Meanwhile, in Beltrant, the capital of Beltrum; the morning after Rio and Celia had visited Count Claire's territory...

At the foot of the hill where the Beltrum royal castle stood was a large lake that sustained the water for the entire capital. Next to the lake was a harbor where enchanted airships were anchored.

At present, the Ricca Guild's enchanted airship was also anchored there, awaiting the boarding of Liselotte, the only daughter of Galarc Kingdom's great lord Duke Cretia. In a private room on board the enchanted airship, Liselotte impatiently waited for departure as her waiting maid, Aria, poured her a cup of tea. But contrary to her elegant manner of sipping tea, Liselotte sighed wearily.

"Goodness me. We can finally leave..."

After being invited to Celia and Charles' wedding ceremony, the uproar over the abduction had resulted in her containment in the Beltrum castle's guest house under the pretext of protection up until last night.

"It's been four days since the ceremony was suspended. Given how busy your daily life is, my lady, I humbly believe that this was a well-deserved break..." Aria, Liselotte's close confidant and head maid, said to her in a calm voice.

"But the work will be piled up when we return, you realize? When I think about that mountain of paperwork..." Liselotte muttered with a gloomy face. As the governor of Amande, the president of the Ricca Guild, and the fact she would have been gone a week by the time she returned, just imagining the amount of work piled up had her feeling despondent.

"There's no helping that. Try not to think about it until we return," Aria said bluntly.

"...Well, I suppose you have a point. It's not like I can do any of that work in my current situation." Liselotte sighed quietly and pouted, her lips sticking out cutely as she slumped her weary body over the table. Seeing that, Aria thought

her expression was befitting of a normal fifteen-year-old girl rather than a noble or merchant. Aria giggled at the sight of Liselotte's true self.

"Lady Liselotte, it's Chloe!" The voice of a young girl could be heard along with a knock on the door.

Liselotte immediately shot up into a proper posture and gave the girl permission to enter the room. "Come in — you can open the door."

With a clack, the door opened. "E-Excuse me. I came to report that the preparations to depart have been completed." Chloe — a cute girl in her early teens, wearing attendants' clothing — stated her business with a hint of uncomfortable nervousness.

"Got it. Tell them I'm ready to depart at any time. Quickly and safely, that is," Liselotte said with a nod, smiling gently.

"U-Understood, my lady! Please excuse me!" Chloe bowed deeply and left the room.

"She still seems to be rather nervous," Liselotte said with a giggle.

"Honestly. Her training period is over now, yet she still has no awareness of herself as a maid." Aria sighed tiredly.

"Fufu, that's a newbie for you. And isn't she just scared of you?" Liselotte said amusedly, turning to Aria. "Even taking that into consideration, her awareness is still lacking," Aria stated resolutely.

Liselotte chuckled. "My my, how strict of you."

Several minutes later, the enchanted airship departed from Beltrant's harbor with Liselotte on board. The wings attached on either side of the sailing airship flapped gently, gradually increasing the speed of the boat along the surface of the water until it lifted off into the air. Its speed accelerated along with the liftoff, causing the ship to soar gently into the sky. At normal operating speed, the airship flew at roughly 50 knots (approximately ninety kilometers per hour).

Today's weather was clear; the enchanted airship was swathed in bright rays of sunlight as it left the city of Beltrant behind it and flew on eastwards to the Kingdom of Galarc.

Then I guess I shall head off, too.

Reiss, the ambassador of the Proxia Empire, watched the airship. He stood on the surface of the water away from the harbor and gazed up vacantly at the sky.

Chapter 5: Infiltrating Rodania

Several hours after Liselotte’s airship left Beltrant harbor...

Rio, Celia, and Aishia had departed from Cleia, the capital of Count Claire’s territory, and made their way to Rodania, Marquess Rodan’s territory located to the northeast of the Kingdom of Beltrum. They flew through the air with spirit arts and looked down on the town from a distance.

“It’s smaller than Cleia in size, but it’s been built rather sturdily,” Rio said, voicing his first impression.

“Marquess Rodan’s territory borders both the Proxia Empire to the north and the Galarc Kingdom to the east, after all. It’s a vital location in terms of the military... That’s why the city has also been fortified as a citadel. Perhaps it was the perfect place for Duke Huguenot’s faction to establish themselves?” Celia explained. Though she may have been a shut-in researcher of sorcery, she wasn’t a noble for nothing. She was fairly knowledgeable about the geography of every region.

“I expected as much, but I guess I’ll need to prepare myself for this. Let’s land somewhere outside the city first. I’ll take out the stone house so you two can wait inside, and I’ll come back once before it gets dark.”

“Okay.”

“Got it.”

At Rio’s suggestion, Aishia and Celia both nodded in unison.



After landing outside the city and setting up the stone house, Rio snuck into Rodania alone in broad daylight. He jumped over a section of outer wall that was relatively unguarded and blended in with the crowds of people inside the city.

Rodania was currently estranged from the Beltrum government, but the city

was still bustling with life. It was possible that the possession of Princess Flora and appearance of the hero had an influence on the people, but if those governing the place were truly vicious, then the city certainly wouldn't be this lively.

Is this the work of Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan? I didn't have a very good impression of them, but...

From his past experience of being falsely accused during his time in the Beltrum Royal Academy, Rio's impression of the two noble families governing this land had been one of brutality and cunningness. However, their reign seemed rather peaceful on the outside.

That being said, cruel and cunning members of nobility were better at hiding their visible flaws.

After Rio had observed a reasonable amount of the city's state, he began to gather information. First, he needed to know if the hero was really summoned in this land — and whether or not that fact was announced officially or not. For that, he decided to start with his usual chatting up of stall owners through purchasing their products. First, he went to make an order at a skewer stand.

"I heard through the grapevine that a hero appeared in this land, is that true?" Rio said to the stall owner as though he was casually gossiping.

"Yeah, it's true. There was a hero summoned here in Rodania," the stall owner said with a friendly smile.

"...So it's true, huh. Is that a well-known fact?"

"Of course — it's a well-known story around here. A huge pillar of light shot up from the depths of the district where the nobles live. That was when the hero was spotted, apparently."

"What kind of person is the hero? Like their name, or..." Rio asked boldly.

"Ah, sorry. I don't know that much." The skewer stall owner shook his head apologetically.

"No no, I was just asking out of curiosity."

"Hahaha, the heroes are the disciples of the Six Wise Gods, after all... Makes

sense that you'd be curious. You seem to have a pretty devout sense of faith there, kid. You're young, yet you mind your manners."

"Ah, thank you..." Rio smiled faintly and tried to avoid elaborating. The stall owner must have mistaken him for a devoted believer of the Six Wise Gods, but he decided to go along with the misunderstanding, as it was convenient.

After Rio finished eating the grilled skewer, he continued his search for information. However, he was unable to figure out the name of the hero, and had to place his hopes on the night infiltration instead.



That night, Rio returned to the stone house and brought Aishia back to Rodania with him. Celia watched the house alone.

The city of Rodania had completely fallen dim, flickering under the light of torchfire. Rio looked down at the city from the skies above.

"First, let's approach the estate. We'll communicate in telepathy from here onwards."

They began their infiltration immediately, slowly lowering their altitude. Their destination was the estate on the cliff at the very furthest end of the noble district; its appearance was like that of a stronghold, built like a sturdy fortress. Behind the cliff was a large lake that sustained Rodania with water.

Rio confirmed the strict state of the security and gave Aishia instructions to close in on the rooftop. ...*Let's go down to the roof of the estate first.*

Okay.

Covered in their black cloaks, the two of them blended with the darkness and landed on the roof. *Then, I'll be off now.*

Aishia would first sneak into the consulate and sound out the hero's location and surrounding security. She turned into her spirit form.

Make sure you take extra care against sensory type artifacts and barriers, Rio said with worry in his voice. No matter how much she could change into her spirit form, there were areas where even Aishia would have difficulty getting into. When it came to places with strict precautions for detecting sorcery set

up, spirit forms made of ode were in danger of being detected.

Aishia nodded. *Got it.* Faint particles of light scattered as she turned into her spirit form. Only the black cloak she had been wearing remained, fluttering gently to the rooftop.

Contact me immediately if anything happens, Rio said, retrieving Aishia's cloak.

Aishia nodded again. *Yup.*

A long time passed. Rio hid any and all inklings of his presence and waited silently on the rooftop.

Haruto, I can't find the hero's location, Aishia's said telepathically.

...You can't find it? You mean there's no one around that seems like a hero? Rio asked, finding that strange.

Yeah. Not within the range I can move, anyway, Aishia confirmed.

You mean there were rooms or areas you couldn't enter because of detection artifacts or barriers?

Yup.

Then it'll be impossible to get in without being noticed, I guess. No, it's possible the hero has moved away from Rodania too... Rio thought, processing the situation. *All right. Can you come back here first? I'll come along this time, do you think you can show me the way? I want to at least confirm the hero's name before we go back today.*

Within a minute, Aishia had returned to Rio and the two of them snuck inside together. *All right, let's go.*

This way — it's easiest to get inside from the rooftop via the watchtower.

The two of them began to move, Aishia leading the way in her material form by pulling Rio's hand. They cast wind spirit arts along the way to make themselves invisible and approached the watchtower.

We have to enter carefully so the guards inside don't notice us, Rio said through their telepathic connection, listening carefully to the watchtower.

Guards were chatting idly amongst themselves.

“Man, I’m so bored. Nothing ever happens.”

“I know, right?”

“Tell me a funny story.”

“I don’t know any. Shouldn’t you know some?”

“If I did, I would have told them to you ages ago.”

There seemed to be two guards in total.

They’ve got their guards completely lowered. We should be fine to go, Rio thought, about to give Aishia the direction to go, when one of the guards suddenly spoke up.

“The hero sure has it nice, always bringing beautiful women with him everywhere.”

Rio froze on the spot, trying to listen to more of their conversation.

“Beautiful women? You dumbass. Watch your mouth. That’s the Second Princess and a duke’s daughter you’re talking about, you realize? If anyone heard you say that...”

“Nobody’s listening. Anyway, that hero took those two girls and went somewhere, didn’t he? Sure must be nice. He looks like he’s even younger than me, too...” One of the guards started complaining, and the other guard sighed and agreed sympathetically.

“...Well, I can understand why you feel that way... But compared to them, we live in a completely different world.”

So the hero’s left Rodania now, huh? Then there’s no need to force our way inside the estate. If I could at least find out his name...

Rio decided to hang around in the hope that one of the guards would say the hero’s name out loud.

“I wish I could meet someone too...”

“How about one of the maids?” But the conversation didn’t go in the direction that he hoped. Rio finally ran out of patience.

Aishia. It's a little risky, but I'm going to cast an illusion on the two guards in the tower. I'll use a wind spirit art to hypnotize them.

All right. Will I need to do so, too? Rio shook his head with a smile. *It's okay. You can just watch.*

With a deep breath, he focused on gathering essence in his hands and sent a faint breeze towards the watchtower. Roughly one minute later, the panicked voice of a guard in the tower could be heard.

"...Hey, I suddenly really need to take a piss."

"Ah, you too? I need to go, too, actually..." The other guard also announced in a restless voice.

Seems like it worked. Rio chuckled when the effect of the hypnosis became obvious. Since he wasn't in direct contact with his target, he couldn't cast a very strong hypnotic spell and it took some time for the effect to take place, but everything went as expected.

"Could I step away for a sec?"

"No fair! I want to go too!"

"I-I was the one who asked first, right? I'll be back as soon as I can, so... Please?!"

"Guh... F-Fine, but make it quick!"

"Thanks!"

With that exchange, one of the guards dashed off with haste.

Let's go. This time, I'll place the remaining guard in a waking dream and have him tell me the hero's name.

Leave that to me. Aishia took the lead and moved first.

The events that happened after that were a splendid display of skill. Aishia snuck into the watchtower easily, holding the guard's head from behind him as she activated her illusion. After spending a few seconds confirming the guard's mind was controlled, Rio snuck into the watchtower next.

The guard gazed at Rio blankly, caught in the illusion. "O-Oh, you're back!"

That was rather... fast?" he said, face brightening happily. He seemed to have mistaken Rio for his coworker that had gone to the toilet first.

"No, I actually haven't gone yet. I wanted to ask you for the hero's name first."

The guard looked at Rio impatiently. "H-Huh?! What the hell, man. Now's not the time for that...!"

"I know, but it's important. I'll go as soon as you tell me."

"Isn't it Hiroaki Sakata?"

"Hiroaki Sakata... Have you heard of the names Satsuki Sumeragi or Takahisa Sendo at all?" Rio asked with a serious look.

"No!" The guard yelled angrily.

"...I see. Don't worry then. I'll be back soon." With those words, Rio had what he came for and turned away.

Let's go, Aishia, he said through telepathy.

Okay. Aishia promptly let go of the man's head, and Rio swiftly jumped out of the watchtower. Aishia followed close behind.

The guard's unfocused gaze vacantly stared at nothing for a while, but he eventually snapped back to his senses.

"...Eh? What?"

Meanwhile, Rio and Aishia had already flown away from the roof and were soaring through the skies, and the other guard returned to the watchtower, done with his business.

"Phew... Hey, I'm back."

The guard that had been placed under a waking dream tilted his head curiously. "...Didn't you come back once before?"

"Huh? What are you on about? Anyways, didn't you need to go too?"

"...O-Oh, right! I'll be right back!" The guard who had been placed under the illusion dashed off towards the toilet.

Interlude: Mii-chan

Meanwhile, in the spirit folk village...

It was early afternoon, and Masato was hard at work training along with Arslan and the others while Miharu and Aki were receiving a spirit arts lesson from Orphia. It hadn't been long since Miharu, Aki, and Masato had moved to the village — roughly two months had passed since Masato had started receiving sword lessons from Rio.

Spirit arts were an ability that could be learned by any human, but it wasn't something that could be achieved in a day. Compatibility varied by species, as well as learning time. In order to be able to use the most simplest of spirit arts, a human of the Yagumo region would take roughly a year and a half to two years, whereas a spirit folk child would generally take half a year for the same result. Though, in rare cases, there were exceptions...

“...Ah, I did it!”

Miharu and the other Earth children had shown remarkable progress in these last two months. Miharu, who had been staring fixatedly at the empty air in her outstretched hand, let out a happy cry when a small bubble roughly one centimeter in diameter appeared in her palm.

“Yup, you did it! Your activation time has been growing shorter and shorter every day!” Orphia, who had been standing to the side as her instructor, said in praise. She was just as delighted as Miharu was.

“That's amazing, Miharu. I've only just started being able to detect ode...” Aki, who had been holding her hand outstretched nearby, murmured somewhat enviously. Unlike Miharu, Aki had yet to reach a level where she could activate a spirit art.

Reaching the point of spirit art activation required the acquirement of three skills first — detecting ode, visualizing ode, and detecting mana (of these three, only ode detection was necessary to use magic). In addition, it required the

manipulation of ode and conveyance of one's will into mana, which would normally take a regular human over a year of training.

Miharu was a special case for being able to activate a spirit art in a mere two months, though Aki was also learning spirit arts at an exceptional pace for a human. At her learning rate, she could catch up to Miharu in a few more months.

"Miharu may be amazing, but Aki isn't losing to most spirit folk in terms of progress either, you know? I don't know the reason why, but the three of you have an extraordinary amount of magic essence." Orphia must have heard Aki's muttering, as she spoke up with some words of encouragement.

"...Essence amount aside, my growth is barely any different compared to Masato, though..." Aki pouted.

"Hmm. That's because Masato is just as amazing, but I guess it's hard to feel that when there are no other humans to compare yourselves with," Orphia said with a bittersweet laugh.

"Speaking of which, how long did it take for Haruto to learn spirit arts?" Aki asked, the question suddenly popping into her mind.

"Ahh, umm... Rio has a contract with Lady Aishia, so he's a bit of a special case, so to speak..." Orphia replied with some difficulty.

"Was he fast?" Aki asked nervously. Miharu listened to them, curious about the answer too.

"I believe he said he was a child when he was suddenly able to use it one day..." Orphia gave in and replied.

"Wow..." Aki's eyes widened.

"Yeah..." Miharu was also taken aback with shock.

"But Rio's case is really one-of-a-kind, so the two of you mustn't compare yourselves with him, okay? You're all unique... There's no need to rush yourselves," Orphia said to the two of them, encouraging Aki not to lose confidence.

"...Okay. But I at least want to learn it faster than Masato!" Aki nodded

enthusiastically, cheering herself up.

“Hmm. Well, you *are* siblings. I suppose having a rivalry is a good thing?” Orphia tilted her head, looking at Miharuru beside her.

“Yup. They’re close, after all.” Miharuru nodded with a smile.

“T-That’s not true!” Aki shook her head furiously out of embarrassment.

“Oho? What’s going on here?”

“Aki’s face is red!”

Latifa and Vera took a break from their nearby training and came over, noticing Aki’s blushing face.

“We were talking about how Aki and Masato are really close siblings,” Miharuru replied with a giggle.

“D-Don’t, Miharuru!” Aki reddened further and whined.

“I see, I see,” Vera said with a grin, looking at Aki’s face.

“W-We’re not! Maybe with Onii-chan, but definitely not with Masato!” Aki turned away to hide her embarrassment and puffed up her cheeks. If Masato had been present, she would have been even more embarrassed.

“Fufufu. We know, Aki. Right, Latifa?” Vera nodded along, then looked at Latifa.

Latifa grinned widely. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“That look tells me you two definitely don’t get it...” Aki glared at Vera and Latifa reproachfully.

“Ahaha, it’s okay. I’m also really close with my Onii-chan, too. We’re the same!” Latifa said with a carefree smile. Vera also puffed out her chest proudly.

“I love my sister Sara very much, so I’m the same, too!”

“...Hmph. Fine, whatever. It’s true that I’m close with my Onii-chan,” Aki muttered under her breath, hiding her bashfulness.

“Fufu.” Miharuru and Orphia exchanged looks before breaking into giggles. Alma and Sara also wandered over from where they had been training nearby.

“Miharu, Orphia — shall we get ready for the cooking class soon?” Alma asked.

“Ah, that’s right. Let’s go, Miharu,” Orphia suggested.

“Okay,” Miharu agreed cheerfully. She had been trying to make the most of her skills to help out the village as much as possible. In order to do that, she had taken over the cooking class Rio had sometimes held for the women of the village. She’d also taken to teaching crafting classes. Orphia was her assistant.

“I’m sure you need as many hands as you can get. We’ll help out, too, so let’s go together,” Sara offered.

Latifa and Vera exchanged glances before immediately jumping in. “We want to go, too!”



Afterwards, Miharu’s group relocated to the village community center. They worked together to prepare for their cooking class in a large food preparation room.

The women of the village gradually gathered, and the class commenced without incident. The participants were split into groups in order to create cream tart cakes, which was the recipe of the day. Despite being nervous about her instructor role, Miharu worked with Orphia to teach the village women. Time passed in the blink of an eye.

“Now, it’s time to try it!”

They moved to the community cafeteria to taste the results. Vera’s wolf ears and tail shook from side to side as she gazed at the sliced cakes expectantly.

“Hurry up, Miharu! Quickly!” Latifa was urging Miharu to cut the cakes faster.

“Smells good...” While Aki wasn’t rushing anyone else, she did stare at the apple cake with intense longing.

Miharu giggled with amusement as she sliced the cakes with a careful hand. “Wait just a little longer.” After serving the cake to the younger ones first, she then went on to place a slice of cake each on a plate for Sara, Orphia, Alma, and herself. During that time, Orphia prepared tea for everyone. With that, it was

finally time dig in.

“Thank you for the food!” they all said before trying the cake.

“Ooooh!” Latifa, Vera, and Aki all looked extremely satisfied with the result.

“Yup, this is very delicious.” Sara also took a bite of cake before nodding happily.

“When everyone works together, it tastes even better,” Alma said with a smile.

“It’s rather fun cooking and eating in a different environment than where we normally are. The people who joined the class also seemed to have fun, so it’s all thanks to Miharu.” Orphia nodded along, smiling at Miharu. The other tables in the cafeteria were occupied by village women who chatted amicably while enjoying their cake.

“Huh, me?” Miharu was taken by surprise and widened her eyes.

“Yup. It’s all thanks to Miharu taking over the instructor role from Rio that this class could resume,” Orphia replied immediately.

“Ahaha, I don’t know if I can make a good substitute for Haruto, but if it helps the village out even a little, then I’m glad.” Miharu grinned a little unsurely.

“This is much more than just a little. Everyone looks forward to Miharu’s cooking classes.”

“Yes, please have more confidence in yourself.”

Both Sara and Alma spoke up to encourage Miharu.

Vera nodded along. “That’s right! Miharu’s cooking is just as delicious as Rio’s cooking. The seasoning is just slightly different, but that’s because they’re foods from Rio’s hometown in the Yagumo region, right?”

“...Yeah. Though there are some Strahl foods too,” Miharu nodded uncomfortably. While Latifa and the older girls had been present at the discussion about bringing Miharu and the others into the village, Vera didn’t know they were from another world. She still believed they were from the same town as Rio.

“I see. There are some foods that are similar to our village, but there are lots of foods in the world that we don’t know about, too. It’s really been a good thing that Rio and Miharuru came to our village!” Vera hummed in appreciation before beaming with a happy expression.

“Fufu, thank you. I’m also very grateful I was able to come to this village and meet all of you. It’s all thanks to Haruto.” Miharuru smiled happily as she spoke.

“Yes! It’s thanks to Rio that I was able to become friends with Latifa, so Rio really is our savior!” Vera looked at Latifa and nodded enthusiastically.

Latifa smiled cheerfully, returning Vera’s gaze. “Ehehe.”

“...It’s true that if Rio hadn’t been there, we would have never been able to meet with Latifa nor Miharuru or Aki like this. When you think of it that way, it’s kinda miraculous.” Sara muttered sentimentally.

Latifa giggled. “Looking back now, the first time Onii-chan and I visited the village, we had no idea what would happen,” she said with amusement.

“Guh...” In contrast, Sara, Orphia, and Alma all looked rather guilty.

Aki watched the exchange between the spirit folk girls in silence, suddenly remembering the past. *Come to think of it, back when Masato first received Rio’s approval of his warrior training, Alma said something in the hot springs... About how the first time Haruto and Latifa wandered into the forest, she had chills fighting him just like when she was watching the warrior training.*

Back then, she had been able to catch a rare glimpse of the cold side of Rio. Now, she was completely distracted by thoughts of that interaction, making her curious about what happened in the past.

“...Now that I think about it, Latifa was brought to this village by Rio too, right? What happened back then?” Aki asked nervously.

Latifa pondered over where to begin. “Hmm. Well, to sum it up, Onii-chan was mistaken for a kidnapper and thrown into a jail...”

“Huh?! Really?!” Aki’s eyes widened in shock. Miharuru also turned her attention towards them in surprise.

“Yup. Umm, the elders have told you why the people of this village live far

away from humans, right? So we always have a barrier put up around the village for warding away humans,” Latifa said, beginning with an explanation of the backstory.

“Ah, did you end up fighting because you entered the barrier without permission, or something?” Aki asked, taking a guess.

“Yeah. It was around four years ago, I think. We crossed the barrier without realizing it and were camping in the forest when we were attacked. I was asleep, so I was already carried to the village by the time I woke up...” Latifa said, reminiscing. The countless barriers that stretched around the village were all of a very high quality. At that time, Rio still hadn’t learned the ways of spirit arts properly, so while he was able to ignore the effects of the barrier and pass through, he hadn’t noticed its activation.

Aki was taken aback before hesitantly looking over at Sara and the other girls. “Were Sara and the others there, too?”

Sara nodded regretfully. “...Yes. When we saw Latifa sleeping, we mistook her for an abducted village child and ambushed Rio. There was no excusing our actions.”

Orphia and Alma also recalled that time with sullen expressions.

Aki must have felt the air getting heavier as she spoke up in a hurry. “B-But the misunderstanding was cleared up, right? You’re all as close as family now. I’m a little curious about what series of events led to that happening with everyone.”

“...Yes, we noticed the misunderstanding itself immediately. Rio had traveling equipment for both himself and Latifa, after all...” Sara explained hesitantly.

“It was in the middle of the night, but we hurriedly reported it to Elder Ursula when we realized Latifa might not be from here. She got angry and ordered us to release him immediately, so Alma and I headed to the jail cells, I believe...” Orphia continued.

“...Yes,” Alma agreed heavily as she recalled. “But the jail was freezing cold and Rio had passed out in only a thin layer of clothing, so his body was completely chilled. He didn’t even twitch when we called out to him, so we

were pretty panicked for a while there, thinking he had died.”

“Ahaha. Alma was quite panicked at the time. She was rushing to check that he was still breathing.” Orphia reflected on the bitter memory and smiled faintly.

“I-I wasn’t that panicked... But I was worried,” Alma explained herself with embarrassment.

“Fufu. You were so relieved when you were able to confirm he was still breathing. Then, we tried to wake him by shaking him, but Rio just wouldn’t wake up...” Orphia said.

“...Come to think of it, Rio was muttering something in his sleep. When he woke up, he also seemed to coming out of some kind of dream, all dazed and stuff...” Alma noted.

“Ah, right. Yeah, he seemed rather disappointed when he saw our faces, almost like he wasn’t seeing us. His expression was really sad too...” Orphia also seemed to have remembered Rio’s face at the time, as she looked rather conflicted. Just what kind of impression did she have of Rio at the time?

“...Something like that happened?” Latifa’s eyes widened in interest. Miharu, Aki, and Sara had also been listening silently, looking at Orphia and Alma with gazes of deep curiosity.

“Yeah. If I’m not mistaken, I think he cried a little. Maybe he met someone in his dream? If so, we may have done something awful when we forcefully woke him up...” Orphia spoke about her complicated feelings regarding the past with a shameful expression.

“...What did Onii-chan say at that time?” Latifa couldn’t help but ask.

“Umm, I don’t know what it was about, but... It sounded something like *yattoaeta* or *miichan*, maybe?” Orphia answered to the best of her ability. Naturally, she didn’t know what those sounds meant; the words Orphia had heard Rio utter were Japanese words, after all — the words for *I finally met you* and *Mii-chan*.

“Eh...?” For Miharu, whose mother tongue was Japanese, Orphia’s words made her heart skip a beat.

Aki and Latifa — the latter of whom was hiding the fact she had memories of her past life — both twitched in interest as well.

Sara noticed the change in Miharu's expression and called out to her curiously. "Is something the matter, Miharu?"

"Ah... Nope. It's nothing." Miharu kept a smile on her face as she shook her head.

...There's no way. Haruto said he was a university student anyway, she told herself.

However, an indescribable feeling squeezed around her heart, which was thudding away for some reason. She couldn't get Rio — no, Haruto — out of her head.

But then, she noticed how Aki was staring at her. "Hm?" Miharu pasted an awkward smile on her face and tilted her head.

"..." For a brief moment, Aki's face twisted with a terribly bitter expression before she immediately averted her eyes.

Could Miharu have... And what... was Aki's face just now? Latifa had been secretly observing the two of them. She knew that Haruto used to call Miharu by the nickname "Mii-chan," which was why her instincts immediately considered the meaning behind Aki's brief expression. She wondered if it was possible they had made the association with Haruto.

But there weren't enough hints as to what was really going on. All Latifa had heard from Rio in the past was that Amakawa Haruto's parents divorced because of his mother's infidelity, leaving a young Haruto and Aki to go their separate ways. There was no way for Latifa to know how Miharu felt about Amakawa Haruto now, much less Aki's unawareness of the reason for her parents divorce or her complex emotions towards Haruto and a father that she had no blood relation to. There wasn't enough evidence for her to come to a sensible conclusion about Aki's expression. Even if Latifa could imagine such an answer, she had no way of confirming it since she was hiding her own previous memories from Miharu and everyone else.

But, even so...

I want to know. Latifa grinded her teeth in frustration. She wanted to lay bare everything she knew about Miharuru, Aki, and Amakawa Haruto. She wanted to talk to them about it all.

But she couldn't. Rio had stopped her. There was no way Latifa would disobey Rio's words by going behind his back, no matter how distressed it made her feel.

The most she could do was come up with a question that pressed the core of the matter in a roundabout way, and watch for the reaction. "...Mii-chan, huh? I wonder what it means. Right, Miharuru?" Latifa kept a smile on her face as she fearfully addressed Miharuru, who was sitting beside her.

"Y-Yeah. Who knows?" Miharuru tilted her head with a somewhat unnatural smile.

This reaction... She really does remember Onii-chan after all, doesn't she? Latifa deduced. She also shot a glance in Aki's direction, who had a faint wrinkle in her brow and an obviously sour expression on her face.



...Does Aki remember Onii-chan too? But this... Latifa could make somewhat of a guess at how Aki felt from her expression, but she couldn't discern the reason behind the emotion that Aki was displaying.

"Aki?" Vera also noticed how Aki's expression had stiffened and peered at her face curiously.

Aki quickly put on a bright expression. "Hm? What's wrong, Vera?"

"...No, it's nothing," Vera said, shaking it off as her imagination. Then she turned to Sara and the others. "Please, continue with what you were saying," she urged.

"Continue... Well, what happened next was Latifa waking up and running into the jail cell, causing a huge commotion, if I recall," Sara said wistfully.

"Huh, Latifa did that?!"

Starting with Vera, everyone who wasn't present back then — including Aki and Miharu — turned their interest towards Latifa.

"F-Forget that already!" Being the center of attention, Latifa tried to cut off the conversation in embarrassment.

"No, I want to hear it! Right, Aki?" Vera said. Aki laughed and nodded in amusement.

"Yeah, I do too."

Miharu and the older girls giggled as they agreed.

"Let's see. The moment Latifa opened her eyes, she started running around in search of Rio without even listening to us. Uzuma and I had to chase after her in a panic," Sara said.

"Geez! You shouldn't tell them about that, Sara!" Latifa blushed red and tried to stop Sara from continuing.

Chapter 6: Encounter

Meanwhile, at a different place and time, while Rio was gathering information in the city of Rodania, the enchanted airship Liselotte was on had made progress along its course, crossing the kingdom boundary between Beltrum and Galarc. At this point in her journey, Amande was right before her eyes.

“Lady Liselotte, we will be arriving in Amande shortly.” Notice of their upcoming arrival at Amande reached the private room where Liselotte and Aria were lounging. The two beautiful attendants that had come to report to her bowed their heads respectfully.

“Finally. Once we return to the residence, our first matter of duty is taking care of all the accumulated paperwork. I’ll be relying on your help, too, Natalie and Cosette,” Liselotte grinned cheerfully, addressing the attendants who had come to give her their report.

“Geh...” One of the maids let out a noise.

“Is something the matter, Cosette?” Liselotte seemed to have picked up the noise perfectly clearly, as she turned to address the maid who had uttered it with a grin.

Cosette smoothed over her expression with a hearty laugh. “No, my lady. I was just wondering if it would be better to have dinner first, as it will be dark by the time we arrive at the end of this tiring journey,” she offered.

“Denied. I have to make up for the time lost in my work. You fully enjoyed yourself during the break in Beltrum, did you not?” Liselotte shook her head and smiled at Cosette.

“Aww, but we were shut away in the guest house there. I didn’t even get to go shopping,” Cosette whined back, pouting her lips.

“But you were able to rest up without having work to do, no?” Liselotte said with a sigh.

“That’s enough, Cosette. Everyone suffered under the same conditions,”

Natalia, the rather serious-looking maid next to Cosette, chided.

Liselotte sighed with exasperation before teasing the hint of a reward. “Well, I suppose you have a point. Once everything calms down, I’ll give you a chance to go on leave.”

“Really?!” Cosette’s face brightened.

“Yes. That’s why I need you to put in the effort a little longer. Natalia, you too,” Liselotte grimaced as she encouraged her subordinates.

“Understood! Leave it to us!” Cosette agreed readily. Beside her, Natalie chimed in.

“Thank you very much.” She bowed respectfully. The prospect of a holiday had a faint smile tugging at her lips.

“Then, let us prepare for our descent...” Liselotte began to say to wrap things up, when the enchanted ship shook, making her scream.

“Kya! What was that?!”

Aria immediately jumped to give directions; it wasn’t normal for the airship to sway this heavily, after all. “Investigate the cause immediately. Natalie, Cosette.”

“Lady Liselotte! Lady Liselotte!” From the corridor on the other side of the door came the frantic sound of running footsteps, accompanied by the voice of a young girl calling Liselotte’s name.

“That’s Chloe’s voice, isn’t it?” Aria promptly went to open the door. Chloe, the attendant in training, appeared in a panic.

“Lady Liselotte!” Aria must have intuitively realized Chloe’s flustered state was related to the shaking of the airship, as her voice came out in a soothing tone. “Calm down. What was that tremor just now? Did something happen?”

At her question, Chloe paused in her flustered panic and took a deep breath. “U-Umm, there’s, there’s trouble! A-A dragon, a black dragon appeared!” she said.

Although Aria couldn’t help the way her eyes widened, she asked her question calmly. “...A dragon caused the airship to shake so much?”

“Oh, the captain said he’d make an emergency landing in a nearby city, so the shaking was probably from him lowering the altitude of the ship... The dragon was spotted pretty far in the distance,” Chloe explained hastily.

Aria gathered her thoughts instantly and gave Liselotte directions. “...Lady Liselotte. Some things still aren’t clear, but this is an emergency situation. Let us head to the captain in order to prepare for the worst. Please, come this way.”

“Yes, let us go.” Liselotte swiftly stood up and moved next to Aria.

“You three come along, too, and protect Lady Liselotte,” Aria ordered Chloe, Natalie, and Cosette.

“Yes, ma’am!” the three attendants responded without delay, and the group made their way to bridge.

As soon as Aria entered the bridge, she called out to the man standing beside the captain at the steering wheel. “First officer, status report on the current situation.”

“Yes, ma’am! While we were on course for Amande, an enormous creature resembling a black dragon was spotted flying towards the north. We are now rerouting away from the area,” the first officer said, pointing northwards from the wide bridge window.

“That’s...” Liselotte and the others looked in the direction he’d gestured towards, and they all gulped.

In the skies to the north where the first officer had pointed was a dragon-like creature with jet-black skin. There was quite some distance between it and the airship, but its size made it easy to spot even with the naked eye.

“Fortunately, it has yet to notice our presence. We are currently lowering our altitude as much as possible. However, we determined that flying to Amande would be dangerous, so we’re landing in a nearby city first. Is this acceptable?” The first officer explained the situation calmly despite breaking into a cold sweat, seeking Liselotte’s approval for their current response.

“Yes, it was a prompt and correct decision. Could you tell me our current position?”

“We’re in the forest area towards the west of Amande, above Count Claire’s territory.”

“West of Amande. Does that make Nor our destination city?”

Nor was a small city located to the west of Amande. It didn’t have any particular industries it was known for, so it merely functioned as a rest stop for people to stay on their way to Amande.

“Yes, we will be arriving momentarily. The captain is steering us in that direction right now, so I ask that you please be patient for just a little while longer.” The first officer glanced at the zealous expression of the captain before bowing his head deeply.



Several minutes later, Liselotte’s enchanted airship made a safe landing on a lake in the outskirts of Nor.

Relieved that they landed on the water safely, Liselotte gave her thanks to the captain. “That was a wonderful landing, captain. I am most grateful to you.”

The elderly captain bashfully shook his head. “Not at all... It is merely my job. I am glad you were unharmed, princess,” he said humbly.

“I see there is another enchanted airship docked at this lake. What would you like to do, Lady Liselotte? I believe the symbol on that flag belongs to the house of Duke Huguenot.” Aria asked as she looked out the window of the bridge. There was one more airship floating next to the airship Liselotte and the others were on.

“Duke Huguenot may be on board, yes. For now, we should hear what their crew has to say. After that, we can continue our preparations to disembark. Is that possible, captain?”

“Of course. Leave it to me.” The captain held his right hand against his chest respectfully and bowed.

After that, under the experienced directions of the captain, preparations for disembarking were made. At the same time, Natalie the attendant led several of the airship’s crew members to make contact with the other airship. Within a

quarter of an hour, the small boat Natalie had departed on returned to Liselotte's airship.

"After discussing with the other side, we have ascertained that the airship belongs to Duke Huguenot. On board along with the Duke was the hero, Sir Sakata, and Second Princess Flora, but they have all gone out to visit the governor of Nor at the moment," Natalie explained concisely.

Liselotte's eyes widened faintly. "...The hero, hmm. No one was hurt, right?"

"No. They landed on the water without incident, it seems."

"...I see. That's fortunate, then." Liselotte sighed in relief before turning to the captain next. "How are the preparations to disembark going, captain?"

"They have been arranged. However, the lake does not appear to be very large, so I fear the waters may be a tad too shallow. It would be preferable to alight via the smaller boats..." The captain assented, seeking Liselotte's judgment on whether it would be an issue.

"I don't mind. Let us depart right away. It seems they've come out to greet us anyway." Liselotte nodded, looking over where there was a small crowd of people waiting on the land next to Nor, flustered. She shrugged her shoulders.



Liselotte and the others boarded a small boat that sailed over to the land. "Why, this is a surprise, Lady Liselotte. Welcome to our city. It has been a long time," the man serving as Nor's governor greeted respectfully.

He had probably assumed Liselotte was on board the airship when he spotted the Ricca Guild's symbol on the flag. There was no way he would forget the face of the great lord's daughter, so he wasn't all that surprised.

Liselotte was also familiar with the man's face, as she returned his greeting politely. "It has indeed been a while, Baronet Bochsá. If it weren't for this situation, I would have loved to have a relaxed chat with you, but..."

"The dragon-like creature comes first, yes. I'm sure you may be aware already, but actually..." Baronet Bochsá turned to look behind him.

"Sup, Liselotte."

Sakata Hiroaki, the young man who was summoned as a hero, interrupted Baronet Bochs and boldly announced his presence from behind the soldiers, raising his right hand and casually calling out to Liselotte. At the same time, he spotted the party of attendants Liselotte had behind her and let out a whistle at their beauty.

“It is nice to see you again, hero.” Liselotte replied to Hiroaki with a sociable smile.

“Ah, you don’t have to address me like we’re strangers, you know? I don’t mind if you call me by my name instead of ‘hero’ all the time. I told you this before, didn’t I?” Hiroaki said, turning a rather expectant gaze towards Liselotte.

Liselotte gave a friendly smile and shook her head sadly. “While your offer is most generous, I am afraid I cannot do such a thing.”

“Sir Hiroaki, we are in the middle of an emergency. Let’s save the casual conversation with Lady Liselotte for a more appropriate time.” Roanna Fontaine — a cute girl in her mid-teens with blonde hair in curled ringlets — came over and scolded Hiroaki.

“Oops... You have a point. Darn it.” Hiroaki gave a small shrug of exasperation.

Liselotte bowed her head deeply. “Lady Roanna, it’s good to see you again. And Princess Flora, Duke Huguenot — you as well. I’m glad to see you all safe. May I ask where all of you were heading?”

“Hahaha. Though we hadn’t made an appointment, we were actually in the middle of heading to Amande to meet with you when we spotted that black dragon on the way. That’s why we landed here in a hurry. We only just arrived moments ago,” Duke Huguenot replied openly, traces of a sigh mixed in with his words.

“In that case, would you know if any damage has been caused?”

“No, it seems like it has only been flying around the skies of this area so far. Though we don’t know what it’s after...”

“...Thank you. It seems we’ll need to have a proper discussion to organize what information is available and how to deal with it.” Liselotte sighed

worriedly before turning to Baronet Bochsa beside her. “Baronet Bochsa, could you kindly provide us a place for that?”

“Of course. It may not be the most ideal, but I am more than willing to invite you all to my estate.”



After that, Liselotte and the others were led to the dining hall of Baronet Bochsa’s estate. Though the tea was being prepared not by Baronet Bochsa’s servants, but Liselotte’s attendant girls.

“Now, I know this is a gathering of people of different affiliations, but with the circumstances as they are...” Liselotte began the emergency meeting as the chairman.

The main attendees of said meeting were Aria, Baronet Bochsa — who governed Nor — the commanding officer of the Nor soldiers, and the visitors from Beltrum: Duke Huguenot, Hiroaki, Flora, and Roanna. The upper staff of the airship crews were also in attendance. While Duke Huguenot’s group were technically foreigners, the situation called for an open exchange of information.

“The first matter of concern is that dragon-like creature’s identity and objective. If you’ve noticed anything at all, no matter how small, please speak up. The first person to notice it was someone on your ship, Duke Huguenot. Is this correct?” Liselotte said, seeking information as she looked around the room. In order to consider the potential damages and measures to deal with it, she wanted as much information as possible.

Duke Huguenot sighed and began to speak with a burdened expression. “Yes, our captain did. I was also in the bridge at the time and saw it immediately. It was flying through the northern skies at a tremendous speed when it suddenly started to circle the area instead.”

“The northern skies... before it circled around here? It sounds like it could either be searching for something, or perhaps demonstrating something.” Liselotte contemplated worriedly, placing a hand against her mouth.

“Ah, just a question...” Hiroaki raised his hand.

Liselotte reapplied a smile to her face. “Yes, hero. What is it?”

“Is that a real dragon? You’ve been calling it a ‘dragon-like creature’ for a while now.”

“...We cannot be sure. There are harmful creatures very similar to dragons that exist — we call them demi-dragons.”

Hiroaki’s eyes widened in interest. “Oh? How’s it different from a real dragon?”

“According to some people, demi-dragons are the descendants of dragons. Their power is highly inferior to that of a real dragon, but they come in a wide range of variants — some demi-dragons may be small, while others may be large,” Liselotte explained.

“Oh, so the usual. They’re not as strong as real dragons, but still pretty strong.” With no basis at all, Hiroaki guessed at the strength of these creatures.

“They’re definitely not just ‘pretty’ strong. The smaller variants of demi-dragon that the Proxia Empire employs the use of are savage and tenacious with skins of steel. And when it comes to the larger variants, they’re practically natural disasters. There have been entire cities in the past that have been annihilated by larger demi-dragons, you know?” Liselotte shook her head furiously, emphasizing the threat.

“Then no matter if it’s a large demi-dragon or real dragon, that thing flying over there is bad news?”

“Yes. I believe it is probably a demi-dragon, but it certainly is far more than any human can handle,” Liselotte nodded with a darkened expression.

“Hm? Why do you think it’s a demi?” Hiroaki asked curiously.

“Neither creature appears near human settlements very often, but true dragons are very rarely witnessed in comparison to demi-dragons. As far as I know, there hasn’t been a true dragon spotted in this area for the last several hundred years. Even when dragons are sighted, most of them turn out to be demi-dragons that were mistaken for dragons. Statistically, a demi-dragon is far more likely.”

“Haha! So an amateur can’t tell the difference, since there aren’t any to spot in the first place,” Hiroaki guessed smugly.

“It is exactly as you say,” Liselotte nodded.

“Ah, but it’s big enough that you can make out its features even from afar. Since it’s most likely a larger variant, can you tell what type it is exactly?” Hiroaki was gradually correcting his understanding of the situation, as his expression grew more serious.

Duke Huguenot spoke up. “No one observed it from up close, so we cannot be certain. But if it’s a larger variant of demi-dragon, there is one species which has a much higher probability of appearing. Isn’t that so, Liselotte?”

“A wyvern, you mean?” Liselotte answered fearfully.

“Yes. However, the wyverns we know of have green skin. I have never heard of a black skinned wyvern before. Which means...”

“A subspecies of wyvern, or possibly a superior subspecies... is highly likely. If not, then it could possibly be a true dragon, or perhaps a new species of demi-dragon too...”

“I’d rather not consider those as possibilities...” Duke Huguenot said with a bitter grimace.

“Does anyone present here have any idea where that dragon-like creature may have come from?” Liselotte asked the room at large.

“...”

There was no favorable response — just a heavy silence that fell over the room.

“Didn’t think so.” Liselotte smiled in resignation, having expected nothing in the first place. “Which means we have to move under the assumption that we will be no match for it. It would be one thing if there were damages already, but the current situation means we must avoid provoking it. For now, what we can do is send out a warning transmission to nearby cities via artifact transmitters, then evacuate the residents in case the worst happens. What does everyone else think about this?” she offered, looking around the room once again.

With their opponent being a literal walking disaster, the safest option was to observe carefully without stimulating it. However, they couldn’t just twiddle

their fingers and wait, so at the very least, they had to make evacuation preparations.

Incidentally, artifact transmitters were, as their name implied, magic artifacts that could be used to send long distance signals, allowing people with the same artifact within a 30 kilometer radius to send and receive voice messages. Because it required an enormous amount of essence to send a signal and lacked confidentiality — anyone with the same artifact could intercept a voice message as much as they wanted — it couldn't be used for exchanging secretive information, but it was a vital tool in times of emergency.

"I am of the same opinion. If it leaves without fuss, then that is for the best. We have no choice but to observe quietly. Attempting to exterminate it would be absurd. There's no telling how much damage that would cause." Duke Huguenot said, supporting Liselotte's line of thinking without pause.

"What do you think, Baronet Bochsa?" Liselotte asked. Officially, the highest position of responsibility in this city went to Baronet Bochsa, not Liselotte.

"...Yes, I agree. We will send a message to the residents to prepare for evacuation. In the worst case, we will evacuate the entire city, so preparations will be made accordingly," Baronet Bochsa nodded heavily.

"Understood. Then we will defer to Baronet Bochsa in regards to the evacuation of the Nor residents. Please see to their safety." Liselotte bowed her head deeply at Baronet Bochsa, not as the governor of Amande, but the daughter of the great lord. After all, she was asking him to look after her father's territory and its citizens.

"Of course. I will make the utmost effort I can, for the sake of Duke Cretia who entrusted this city to someone as inexperienced as me. Please leave it to me." Baronet Bochsa placed a hand over his heart respectfully and bowed.

Liselotte showed a faint smile on her face. "What will you do, Duke Huguenot? I'm afraid we do not have the personnel available to assign guards to you, so personally I would recommend you take Sir Hiroaki and Princess Flora as far back to Beltrum as you can..."

As nobles of a foreign country, they were outsiders here. While Liselotte hadn't invited them to visit her herself, it would cause an international incident

if they died on her territory.

“Hmm...” Duke Huguenot seemed to understand that situation too, as he nodded in contemplation. “Hey hey, what are you gonna do, Liselotte? Don’t tell me you plan on staying here,” Hiroaki interrupted in a hurry.

Liselotte shook her head with a wry smile. “...No, I will head to Amande. While I’ve left a contact in my place, I am still the governor of the city, so I have a duty to communicate with the neighboring cities and plan a countermeasure.” The current situation was no laughing matter for Amande, either.

“But... wait. Are you going to go by airship? Wouldn’t you provoke it if you flew away in that? You just said we shouldn’t provoke it, right?” Hiroaki’s eyes widened in surprise as he objected to Liselotte’s decision.

“Yes. That is why I will travel by land. Fortunately, if we leave Nor tomorrow morning, we should arrive at Amande before dark,” Liselotte replied in a completely calm tone.

“...You’re going to Amande by land? While taking your maids? The others are all just the airship crew, right?”

“That is correct. The crew have to take care of the airship, so I’ll have them remain in Nor.”

“But traveling to Amande with just your maids has to be tough, since you’re all girls...” Hiroaki looked troubled as he expressed his disapproval.

“There’s no need for worry — all my attendants have received combat training. And, though you may not believe it, I know enough self-defense to protect myself, too.” Liselotte tilted her head with a troubled face.

“...Sir Hiroaki, you’re bothering Lady Liselotte with your insistence. The duty of a noble must be carried out regardless of gender.” Roanna, who had been listening silently until then, warned Hiroaki against pressing further.

“But, Roanna...” Hiroaki felt highly uncomfortable with the idea of it, as he continued to show objection to Roanna’s warning. “...No, it’s fine. Yeah, I got it,” he murmured after a pause.

Liselotte was relieved to hear he was convinced. “Do you understand now?”

“I’ll go along with you, Liselotte,” Hiroaki declared.

“Huh?!” Liselotte’s eyes widened in shock, and Roanna reprimanded Hiroaki in a panic.

“Sir Hiroaki!”

“Wait. Just listen, Roanna. As a man — no, as a hero — I can’t flee to safety and leave Liselotte in danger like this. As a hero, I have to be the one to protect Liselotte.” Hiroaki sighed and looked at Liselotte, strongly emphasizing his hero status as he spoke.

Roanna tried to object immediately. “However...!”

“Wait there, Roanna. There is no need to dismiss Sir Hiroaki’s idea so adamantly.” Duke Huguenot admonished Roanna calmly.

“I-Is that really fine, Duke Huguenot? For Sir Hiroaki to...” Roanna objected with frustration.

“Sir Hiroaki is a hero. It is just as he stated — we are not in a position to give the hero orders. And it is true that if a hero were to flee the danger, unfavorable rumors may stir. Do you not agree?” Duke Huguenot asked Roanna in a roundabout manner. The corners of his lips were faintly turned upwards in a smile.

“That’s...” Roanna’s face clouded over unhappily.

After listening to their exchange, Liselotte sighed quietly. “Please hold on a moment, Duke Huguenot. Sir Hiroaki is not a hero of our kingdom. I’m sure you understand the consequences of placing Sir Hiroaki in danger like this, right?” she asked. Implied between the lines was her refusal to take any responsibility no matter what happened.

“But of course.” Duke Huguenot acknowledged that fact and nodded with the brazenness of a noble.

“...Do you understand the consequences, too, Sir Hiroaki? As a disciple of the Six Wise Gods, you are in a position that symbolizes the Gods’ authority. As such, to the people of Strahl who worship the Six Gods, your existence is almost like that of a god to them. If something were to happen to you and that truth

ended up spreading, it may affect your surroundings,” Liselotte warned.

Hiroaki was unable to hold back a smug smile. “Ah, that’s a silly question. I may be the hero, but I’ve sworn my willingness to assist Duke Huguenot and the others. But that was on the condition that the type of hero Duke Huguenot sought was one that I could accept as the correct definition of hero. If I left you here while I fled to safety alone, that would go against my duty as a hero,” he said with a smirk.

“Personally, I would prefer to decline your very kind offer...” said Liselotte.

“It’s useless. I told you already, no? Leaving a beautiful girl behind goes against my duty of being a hero. I’ll follow you whether you like it or not,” Hiroaki said with a triumphant look, puffing out his chest.

“That’s how it is, Liselotte. Could you please allow Sir Hiroaki to accompany you? You may consider this a request instead of an offer to assist you. Even if the unthinkable were to occur, none of the responsibility will fall upon you, and we will not consider it a debt of any kind. I would even be willing to write a contract stating this,” Duke Huguenot offered without pause.

“...Are you serious?” Liselotte asked with a sigh, half given up already. It was easy to reject him verbally, but she could see that any more discussion would only be unproductive.

“The most serious. In our case, Sir Hiroaki acting of his own accord would be a problem for us. We cannot afford to split our forces by any means. We will also gather our forces and accompany you, too. Is that acceptable, Princess Flora?” Duke Huguenot agreed amicably before turning to Flora.

“Y-Yes. We cannot return without Sir Hiroaki, either,” Flora said with a nod.

“Yeah, we’ll just be escorting you from Nor to Amande. Unless the dragon-like thing nearby attacks, it shouldn’t be that dangerous. And if the worst were to happen, that’s when you can really rely on me, you know?” Hiroaki said, shrugging his shoulders dramatically.

“...You cannot be too cautious. Make sure not to let your guard down,” Liselotte said worriedly.

“Ah, just saying, but you shouldn’t underestimate my Yamata no Orochi,

yeah?" Hiroaki ruffled his head and raised his hand. Light gathered in his palm, forming a distorted western-styled blade.



“That’s...” Liselotte’s eyes widened.

“The Divine Arms owned by the heroes. I named mine Yamata no Orochi,” Hiroaki explained with a smug huff.

“Yamata no... Orochi.” Liselotte muttered its name.

“Oh, you have good pronunciation. Yamata no Orochi was a water god in the country I lived in. I gave it that name as it’s related to the power hidden in my Divine Arms. It takes the form of an eight-headed dragon, so it’s also called the dragon god.”

“Ooh...” Those present in the room raised their voices in awe, staring at the blade in Hiroaki’s hand. He seemed pleased by this.

“Well, I haven’t been able to try it at its full power yet, but its ability should live up to its name. It’s possible that the wannabe dragon nearby won’t stand a chance against it, either,” he said with a finishing pose, holding the sword at the ready.

Liselotte stared at Hiroaki’s blade intently before bowing her head quietly. “...In case the worst happens, I will rely on you, then.” Using an ability that had never been tested before in a real battle was dangerous, but she didn’t say that out loud.

“B-Baronet Bochs! Excuse me!” A soldier of the city came running in a panic. Tension ran through the room, everyone imagining the worst.

“What happened?!” Baronet Bochs asked immediately with a stern look.

“T-The dragon-like creature flew off towards the northern skies!” The soldier reported on the situation in a high-pitched voice.

“What...?” Baronet Bochs’s expression showed faint shock before he turned his gaze to Liselotte, seeking her thoughts.

“...It may still be nearby. There’s also a possibility it will return. It’s still too early to think that the danger has passed. There will be no changes to the plan yet,” Liselotte offered calmly.

“It may be presumptuous of me, but I agree with Liselotte. It is still too early to relax. I believe it would be best to stay alert for several more weeks, at

least,” Duke Huguenot agreed immediately.

“...You’re right,” Baronet Bochsá agreed with a tired expression.

“Ah, it’s just another stupid beast in the end. It can’t think for itself, so its actions are unpredictable. At any rate, there’s no changing my role of safely seeing Liselotte off. Leave that to me.” Hiroaki exhaled and shrugged his shoulders.

That night, Liselotte finished dinner and shut herself away in a guest room of Baronet Bochsá’s estate in order to prepare for their departure the next morning. At the moment, only Aria, her most trusted aide, was in the room with her.

“Hah...” Liselotte sighed heavily.

“Are you really okay with it?” Aria asked shortly.

“With what?”

“Having the hero’s company.”

“...I’m not really okay with it, but there isn’t much I can do about it. Though he may be a hero of another kingdom, I cannot speak against him too strongly. And judging by his personality, he would have come along even if I adamantly refused him,” Liselotte said with a tired expression, sighing once more.

“He does seem to be a rather willful person. Perhaps you caught his attention and interest? Congratulations,” Aria said, giggling in amusement.

“It’s no laughing matter...” Liselotte sulked and glared at Aria reproachfully.

“Well, forgive me, then. But wouldn’t this incident count as a favor for Duke Huguenot since you’re going along with the spoiled whims of the hero?”

“...That’s true. The duke seemed to think that way himself. That being said, from what I could see, that hero showed no signs of the mannerisms or aura characteristic of people of the military arts. I do not believe he has received proper combat training before.”

“He looked like he was completely unguarded to me too. And yet, that behavior was brimming with confidence. It didn’t seem like he was acting the amateur on purpose... Maybe the Divine Arms are just that amazing?”

“Recklessly handing an untrained person a powerful weapon is like asking for your allies to be injured,” Aria said with a darkened expression.

“...I’ll entertain him in the horse carriage while we’re moving. There’ll be quite the squad formed thanks to their knights accompanying us, so I doubt any bandits or the like would bother us. If a monster or beast attacks, you girls should coordinate with the knights to take care of them.”

“Understood. I can guess what you’re thinking, but leave it to us.”

“Yes, thank you. Well, we’ve already clearly defined the line of responsibility with them, so with regards to protection, we’ll rely on their accompanying knights as much as possible. There’s no need for our side to aggressively step into the frontlines,” Liselotte said, smiling tiredly.

“Your consideration is most appreciated. However, there were rumors several months ago of adventurers repeatedly going missing in the forests to the west of Amande. We must not let our guard down,” Aria warned Liselotte.

Liselotte placed a hand against her mouth and searched back in her memory. “Now that you mention it, there *was* a report like that. The disappearances suddenly stopped roughly two months ago, if I recall...”

“We dispatched a search party, but they weren’t able to deduce the cause of it all. A missing adventurer typically isn’t that rare of an incident, but we’ll be passing through that exact forest tomorrow, so I urge that you take care of yourself,” Aria said solemnly.

Liselotte thought for a moment. “...You’re right — I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.”



The next morning, Liselotte took her attendants and made their way to the garden of Baronet Bochsá’s estate. Hiroaki, Flora, and Roanna were yet to be seen in the garden, but Duke Huguenot’s knights had already gathered along with two horse-drawn carriages.

There were eight attendants, including Aria, Natalie, Cosette, and Chloe, whereas the Huguenot side had 26 knights — among them being Duke Huguenot’s eldest son, Stewart Huguenot, and Marquess Rodan’s second son,

Alphonse Rodan.

“Liselotte, allow me to introduce you to the commanding officer and his assistants before we depart,” Duke Huguenot said once he’d spotted Liselotte. Stewart, Alphonse, and another male knight in his mid-twenties walked over. The latter stepped forward first.

“My name is Raymond Brandt. It is an honor as a knight to be able to escort a beautiful woman like you. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Lady Liselotte,” he greeted respectfully, kneeling before Liselotte in a pompous manner.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mister Raymond.” Liselotte gracefully held the hem of her skirt and returned the greeting.

“The two young ones here are Brandt’s assistants, acting as the supervisors of the younger knights. While it is embarrassing to admit, we’re short on personnel. In order to have them gain experience, the younger knights have been proactively pushed to more assignments. First, this is Alphonse, Marquess Rodan’s son,” Duke Huguenot said.

“I’m Alphonse Rodan. It’s nice to meet you, Lady Liselotte.” Alphonse huffed with a smug smile and greeted proudly.

“Pleased to meet you, Mister Alphonse,” Liselotte returned the greeting brightly.

“And this is my son. You may have met him at a dinner party somewhere before. Stewart, introduce yourself.”

Stewart stared intently at Liselotte’s face before bowing deeply. “I’m Stewart Huguenot. Nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Liselotte returned the words with a cheery smile. “Now, I shall introduce the representative of my guards as well. This is Aria, who also works as my head attendant.”

Alphonse widened his eyes at Aria’s beauty before speaking. “...I will not stand for you beautiful ladies putting yourselves in danger. There is no need for you to act as escorts — we knights will be sufficient in protecting you...”

Liselotte shook her head with a chuckle. “Thank you for the consideration.

However, my attendants are also trained in combat, so we will not fall behind you knights.”

“Hahaha, that is reassuring to hear.” Alphonse laughed heartily, looking at Aria’s slender figure. He didn’t seem to be taking Liselotte’s words seriously.

“...Aria? Aria, you said? Could you be the Governess family’s...” Raymond stared at Aria’s face closely and muttered. Having overheard Raymond’s words, Duke Huguenot spoke up.

“Hmm? Do you know her, Raymond?”

“She’s the daughter of the Viscount Governess’s family. Our fathers are well-acquainted with each other, but I haven’t seen her since we were young...” Raymond said as he stared fixedly at Aria.

“Hmm. No wonder she seemed somewhat familiar...” Duke Huguenot said in comprehension, looking at Aria somewhat suspiciously. He wondered why a noble from Beltrum was serving Liselotte.

“You grew out your hair... I’ve always wondered what you were up to. What happened to your family was, umm, unfortunate... But you were working at the castle after you dropped out of Beltrum’s Royal Academy, right?” Raymond asked with a nervous expression.

“It was difficult for the daughter of a ruined house to stay there, so I quit. I am serving Lady Liselotte now, so I have left my kingdom behind me,” Aria replied simply.

“I see...”

That makes sense... Duke Huguenot accepted with a conflicted face.

Meanwhile, Raymond looked like he wanted to say something as he watched Aria with the same conflicted expression.

Liselotte seemed to notice the air growing heavier. “She’s an extremely talented person, you know? After she ran away and started to work as an adventurer, I scouted her to work for me. She’s now one of my most trusted retainers,” she said proudly.

“Hahaha. I suppose that means our kingdom has regrettably let a special

talent go.” Duke Huguenot laughed openly, joining Liselotte in changing the topic.

“Yes, fortunately for me. But under no circumstances would I be willing to return her, sorry to say,” Liselotte said, giggling with a smile.

Since, all joking aside, you really are a special talent. No? She looked over at Aria and gave a small wink.

Thank you very much. Aria smiled in return, letting out a puff of laughter.



After the exchange with Duke Huguenot and his entourage, Liselotte was sent off by Baronet Bochsá. She departed for Amande, accompanied by a large party of Duke Huguenot’s knights and her fully-equipped attendants.

The road through the forest was wide enough for three horse-drawn carriages to pass each other, but the two carriages in their party moved in one line as the knights and attendants surrounded them. The rear carriage held Duke Huguenot, while the front carriage held Liselotte, Flora, Roanna, and Hiroaki.

Hiroaki casually gave a big yawn as he stretched his legs within the carriage. “I’m still sleepy, but it’s nice being rocked by the carriage for once. And this way, I get to chat with you guys in a private room, too.” He looked around at the cute girls accompanying him and smiled with satisfaction.

“You must not let your guard down, Sir Hiroaki.” Roanna pouted her lips slightly as she warned Hiroaki.

“Hey hey, there’s no need to sulk like that, Roanna.” Hiroaki smirked with a huff.

“...I am not sulking. I have no reason to sulk. I am merely worried that Sir Hiroaki will be in danger.” Roanna cutely said in an irritated tone.

“Hahaha, I see, I see. However, I’m here to protect Liselotte, not you guys.” Hiroaki laughed cheerily, patting the head of Roanna beside him. Then, he looked past Liselotte seated diagonally before him and landed his gaze on Flora, who sat across from him.

“...Thank you for your consideration. However, as Roanna says, it would pain

me to see the hero in any danger too. Please don't push yourself too hard." Liselotte pasted a commendable grin on her face as she replied to Hiroaki.

"Ah, I don't mind if you're worried for me, but do I really seem that unreliable to you? I'm still a hero, you know?" Hiroaki's smile turned bitter as he looked at Liselotte and the others.

"You are, of course, most reliable. However, you don't like conflict, correct? You don't want to use your hero powers to kill people. Isn't this what you told us when we first met?" Roanna said, peering at Hiroaki's face from the side with a pained expression.

"Did the hero really say such a thing...?" Liselotte widened her eyes slightly in curiosity.

"Ah, you mean when I was first summoned? Now that you mention it, I did say something like that." Hiroaki got a far look in his eyes as he thought back to the past uncomfortably.

"Out of pure curiosity, I would like to hear more about when you were summoned." Interested in the topic of his summoning, Liselotte decided to inquire about it somewhat boldly.

"Ah, you want to hear about me? Why, I used to be rather inexperienced in my youth, but if it's at the request of Liselotte herself, then sure. I'll tell you," Hiroaki agreed happily. He started chatting talkatively. "Well, to be honest with you, when I was first summoned into this world, I didn't know anything. Suddenly, Flora was there, telling me I was a hero or something I didn't understand. Anyone would be wary, yeah?"

"That must have been quite the ordeal..." Liselotte commented, urging him to continue.

"That being said, I wanted to know what was going on, so I listened to what she had to say. And sure enough, there came the cliché words I had been expecting — that I had been summoned as a hero to help them. They told me Duke Huguenot and the others were in some political struggle with the current government, on the verge of turning into armed conflict. And, well, you'd expect them to be looking for my power to use in war, right?"

“So that’s when you said you didn’t want to use your hero power to kill others,” Liselotte said, grasping the general flow of Hiroaki’s story.

“Yeah. Furthermore, I had no intention of becoming a hero... Until I heard about these girls’ situations and decided I had to be the one to protect them. As I learned about the position of a hero, I realized there were things that I could do in a war other than kill people,” Hiroaki said, looking at Flora and Roanna.

And so he became a hero, exactly how Duke Huguenot wanted, huh? Liselotte thought, but didn’t say out loud.

“That’s wonderful of you,” she praised.

“Don’t say that — it makes me seem like some kind of spoiled child overflowing with a sense of justice. That’s not who I am. I don’t want to be seen as one of those nasty main characters.” Hiroaki waved his hand dismissively, averting his gaze out of embarrassment.

“I don’t believe that’s the case...” Liselotte shook her head.

“Yes, it is exactly as Lady Liselotte says,” Flora approved, and Roanna followed suit.

“With all due respect, I must agree.”

“Ah, don’t misunderstand me here. The reason why I want to avoid killing people is because I believe that is a violation of human rights. In the country I was in, no matter what the circumstance, murder was a sentence to being isolated from society for life. And anyway — what goes around, comes around. Humans tend to be tormented by bad aftertastes or feelings of guilt. Honestly, I look down on the act of killing people too. Even if it were for the sake of the kingdom, I don’t think a hero should perform such an inhumane act,” Hiroaki explained, clearly laying out his values.

“...I see your reasons now,” Liselotte said; a quiet and noncommittal response.

I guess he doesn’t know how many murderers he’s surrounded by right now, then, she was thinking to herself.

“That’s all the more reason as to why I’m worried. It’s not uncommon to be

attacked by monsters and beasts on the roads that are far away from civilization. There may even be bandits around.” Roanna clutched Hiroaki’s sleeve coquettishly.

“Nah, I doubt any bandits would attack a group of this size and power. And if it was against a monster or beast, I wouldn’t hold back from using my Yamata no Orochi to eliminate it,” Hiroaki said, a challenging smirk rising onto his face.

“There is no need for Sir Hiroaki to bother lifting a hand at mere monsters or beasts. You should just leave it to the knight escorts,” Roanna said imploringly.

Yes, I’d be grateful for that, too. From Duke Huguenot’s perspective, I guess he wants to see the hero in actual combat? It doesn’t seem like he has any real experience, after all... Liselotte thought, before taking a tired breath.

“However, that’s part of a hero’s duty too, right? To subjugate or show mercy to those who have wronged other people. I have become a hero now. I should experience things like that, too,” Hiroaki said, sighing with exasperation.

Liselotte decided it was the perfect opportunity to ask Hiroaki of any real combat experience. “...Do you have any experience subduing monsters or beasts, hero?”

“None. Unfortunately, my previous world was rather peaceful. That being said, I won’t cower before a mere monster or beast. I hate any sort of sniveling like that. Well, though they may have wronged people, it still doesn’t feel too good taking their lives...” Hiroaki responded, looking gloomy.

“You really do hold an intense dislike for conflict. Sir Hiroaki, you truly are so kind...” Roanna’s expression darkened as she looked up at Hiroaki’s face.

“It’s fine. I’m in this world right now, after all. My old world is gone. It’s probably necessary for me to lightly experience some real combat and say my true farewells to that other world.” Hiroaki seemed to be completely submerged in his sentimental feelings as he petted Roanna’s head.

“You truly are a wonderful person,” Roanna said, clinging to Hiroaki.

Liselotte sighed quietly to herself, her gaze shifting to Flora sitting beside her. *Ugh, I hope we arrive in Amande soon... Hmm?* She realized rather belatedly that Flora had been quiet during that entire exchange.

“Princess Flora, how are you feeling? I hope the carriage ride isn’t too uncomfortable for you... Please let me know if you need anything,” she offered out of concern.

“Ah, no, I’m fine. Thank you for your consideration.” Flora gave an uncomfortable smile and shook her head.

“That is good to hear. I couldn’t help but notice you weren’t saying much...” Liselotte said, observing Flora’s face.

“Ah, no, umm. I’m not very good at talking, so I feel calmer just listening to other people talk like this. Everything Sir Hiroaki is saying is new to me, so...” Flora excused herself, smiling bashfully.

“...Oh, I apologize for assuming, then. But would you mind talking to me a little? There is much I would like to hear about from you, if possible.”

“Oh, I would be happy to,” Flora agreed cheerfully. Hiroaki, who had overheard their conversation from where he sat opposite to them, raised an objection.

“Oi oi, don’t forget about us too.”

“...Of course. So, what shall we start with?” Flora would probably speak less with Hiroaki joining the conversation, but Liselotte couldn’t refuse him. She knew she would have to lead the talk and accepted Hiroaki reluctantly.





While Liselotte and the others were steadily proceeding down the road...

Far in the skies above, the Proxia Empire ambassador, Reiss, was flying along clad in his black cloak. *The security's turned out heavier than I expected. Duke Huguenot's faction's accompaniment was completely unplanned for. It was all well and good sending the Evil Black Wyvern ahead to interrupt their business, but now what...*

Reiss observed Liselotte's party with sharp eyes; below him, Liselotte and the others showed no sign of awareness about Reiss' presence above their heads as they traveled to Amande.

The original goal was to only capture Liselotte Cretia, but this makes the attack much more difficult to set up. However, Princess Flora's presence is a welcome surprise. If handled carefully, this situation could allow for us to control the relationship between the Huguenot faction and the Galarc Kingdom, Reiss thought to himself with a cold smirk to his mouth. There was no way he was passing up this opportunity.

Which means I'll have to splurge a little. I wanted to save this for the attack on Amande, but it'll be good to test how far the current heroes have grown, too.

Not much time had passed since their departed from Nor, so Reiss leisurely pondered when he should launch his plan with a pleasant look in his eyes. He decided to observe them for a little longer.

Chapter 7: Ambush

After that, Liselotte's party continued to clatter along in their carriages, ignorant of Reiss' presence above them. They proceeded through the deep woods towards Amande. The front carriage where Liselotte and the others were riding had been filled with incessant chatter for some time now.

"...So I shut myself away in my room that day, reading two whole books before I knew it. When I finally came out in the evening, my sister was very exasperated with me," Flora was saying happily.

"Fufu, you sure must like reading," Liselotte interjected with a smile.

"Yes!" Flora agreed happily.

Liselotte looked at Flora's expression. *So it isn't that she's bad at talking after all. When she came to my estate last time, too, she responded properly whenever I asked her something...* she thought, analyzing Flora. Rather than being bad at speaking, Flora was probably just shy. While that was part of the reason why she didn't speak much, Hiroaki's enthusiastic bragging about himself probably didn't help with allowing Flora the chance to speak, either.

In that regard, Roanna was a much better listener in how she cleverly made Hiroaki feel good about his chattering. Her difference in personality to Flora was clear.

"Ah, well I've read eleven books in a day before," Hiroaki boasted.

Liselotte widened her eyes in a show of amazement. "Why, that is amazing."

"As one would expect from Sir Hiroaki. With that speed of reading, you could put a great amount of information into your head..." Roanna looked at him with reverence.

"Well, even I can't read technical books at that speed, but if it's popular fiction produced for entertainment, then I've read most of the ones produced in my world. I just forget myself and lose time reading," Hiroaki said smugly.

“Umm, I can’t read that fast, but I think I understand. I find myself completely immersed in the world of the story when I’m reading fictional novels, too...” Flora offered hesitantly. She seemed to find it easier to join the conversation when it was about topics that interested her.

Liselotte giggled, smiling. “I would love it if the two of you could tell me a little more about the worlds you’re so immersed in and what you’re thinking about when you read,”

“Oh?” A thought seemed to occur to Hiroaki, making him grin happily.

“...The world I was in, you say?” Flora’s eyes rounded in surprise.

“Yes. If you don’t mind, will you tell me about it?” Liselotte asked, peering at Flora’s face closely.

“Umm, I read novels while thinking of myself as the mirror opposite of the main character in the story. The main character that has something I don’t have moves around in a world I don’t know about. As I wonder about what the main character might be thinking or what kind of actions they will take, my mind gets more and more immersed until it feels like I’m in the world of the story, experiencing all the emotions...” Flora said, looking a little embarrassed.

“Ah, I think I get it. There aren’t many good works out there that can make you think that way, though. Most have such rough backgrounds and development that they cannot achieve that,” Hiroaki lamented.

“Then the world Sir Hiroaki speaks about is...” Liselotte began to ask, when suddenly —

“S-Stop the carriage! Monsters are in the area! Everyone, prepare for combat!” Aria’s yelling voice could be heard from outside. One beat later, the carriage came to a stop.

“Whoa, what’s going on?!” Hiroaki’s body shook as he looked around the carriage in confusion.



Moments before notice of the monster attack reached Liselotte’s carriage, Aria walked in front of the carriage with Liselotte and the others inside,

surveying the forest with her sharp eyes.

...That's strange. It's too quiet.

"What's the matter, Aria? You seem kind of tense. Do the gazes of the knights bother you?" Cosette, who was walking next to Aria and noticed her sharp look, called out to her.

The current positions of the squad were as follows: Aria and the other female attendants were escorting the front of Liselotte's carriage, Stewart and Alphonse each took a side to the left and right of both carriages with most of the knights, while Duke Huguenot's carriage was protected from the rear by commanding officer Raymond and several other knights.

"No, that's not it." Aria shook her head with a sigh.

"But... can't you feel them looking?" Cosette said with a happy giggle.

"They just find it curious to see women holding weapons," Aria answered flatly. Compared to the armed knights, the attendants looked distinctive in their uniforms with weapons equipped. Among them, Cosette particularly stood out by carrying her halberd.

"Well, I'm sure that's part of it, but wouldn't you get used to seeing that pretty quickly? I think they're actually entranced by my beauty. What do you think?" Cosette said proudly. In reality, her appearance was far above that of an average person.

"Then wouldn't the attention gather on you more than Aria?" Natalia said exasperatedly from where she was walking nearby.

"S-Shut up. Aria's face is too perfect and cold. Someone cuter like me is much better. Right, Chloe?" Cosette objected, turning to the trainee attendant walking beside her.

"Huh, me?! No, ah, umm..." Chloe looked between Aria and Cosette's faces, at a loss for words.

"You don't have to take her seriously, Chloe," Natalie said with a sigh.

"Ah, okay. But I think everyone is all very beautiful," Chloe offered hesitantly.

"Fufu, thank you. You're a good girl, Chloe."

Chloe's cute, too, you know?" Natalie and Cosette both smiled happily. Chloe was taken aback and flushed red.

"N-No, that's not true..."

Natalie and the others watched Chloe fondly. After a lull in conversation, Cosette turned to Aria.

"So anyway, you know the commanding officer of the knights? He was a little stuck up, but he's handsome. Introduce him to me, Aria... Hm? You really are looking tense now. Is there something bothering you?"

Aria was looking at their surroundings with stern cautiousness. "...Don't you think it's a little too quiet?" she asked.

"Too quiet?" Natalie and Cosette exchanged a look before tilting their heads. Chloe also looked on in confusion.

"The forest. I can't feel any of the heavy presences unique to monsters and beasts," Aria elaborated.

"Presences... We haven't been attacked by any monsters or beasts yet, but even they wouldn't try anything against this many people, don't you think?" Cosette said while glancing around.

Wild beasts were cautious creatures — Unless they were highly territorial, in their breeding season, or starving for food, they rarely attacked humans. In contrast to that, monsters were intelligent and aggressive beings. While they couldn't speak, even the weakest monster — the goblin — could use simple equipment and swarm in groups to attack people. During the Divine War, goblins had served the Demon King's army. For humans, they were vile and malicious creatures that were to be targeted for elimination.

"Aria's senses are reliable, so it's a little curious, but... Could it be possible they're just keeping their distance from us out of caution?" Natalie offered.

"This area's already under the jurisdiction of the Amande adventurer's guild. If a group of monsters appeared, they'd be eliminated immediately. Ah, but maybe the monsters know that and hide away deep in the forest, building their strength instead," Cosette joked.

Natalie's face darkened with worry as she shivered. "...That would be terrifying. Have there been any reports recently of monster numbers dropping?"

"Mm... There was a report from the adventurer's guild about two months ago that monster spawn rates were down a little, but it isn't too rare to see that kind of fluctuation... Well, there is the case of the black demi-dragon, too, so we should look into it a little more once we get back to Amande," Cosette said with a thoughtful look.

"You're right — let's do that. Hah, I don't see any rest in our foreseeable future..." Natalie sighed, head drooping slightly.

"Ugh, don't say that..." Cosette grimaced.

Aria remained alert as usual of their surroundings, when —

"S-Stop the carriage! Monsters are in the area! Everyone, prepare for combat!" she suddenly yelled, making the carriages come to a halt.

The attendants immediately responded by surrounding the carriage with Liselotte and the others, but the knights looked around dubiously. "What? Monsters? Where...?" Their lack of trust in Aria had caused them to react belatedly, naturally.

"There is an enormous number of monsters hiding in the forests to both sides of us! I don't know how they closed in this far, but hurry and ready your shields!" Aria ordered in irritation. The knights on the outside ring protecting the carriage did as they were told, lifting their shields towards the forest with slightly sluggish movements.

"Guh!" An incredible number of stones were suddenly thrown their way, hitting the knights and carriage.

"Kyaah?!"

"Whoa, what's going on?!"

Flora and Hiroaki's yells could be heard from within the carriage.

"*Magicae Murum.*" The attendants held their hands out in the directions they were facing and all chanted a spell at the same time. Then, a spell formula

appeared at their palms, the magic circle rising and transforming their magic essence into a transparent wall of energy.

Magicae Murum was, as its name implied, a magic spell that created a protective wall made of magic essence. This barrier could block outside attacks from reaching the occupants inside. Its defensive abilities were controlled by the essence and size of the area, and simply maintaining it consumed essence. Thus, it was unfeasible to keep up forever, limiting its usefulness but making it the perfect ability for catching up on what was going on, or buying time to organize. A situation just like this.

The magic barrier the attendant girls put up completely enshrouded the carriage with Liselotte and the others inside; all additional stones thrown at the carriage were deflected. However, there were still knights that were injured by the first few stones thrown. While most of the stones had been blocked by the shields, several knights were placing pressure against their injuries.

Stones were the most primitive form of long-ranged weaponry, but their force was not to be underestimated. An unarmored human could be rendered incapable of fighting in a single hit, depending on where the stones struck.

“Kuh! Make the heavily wounded step back. Knights, continue to hold your shields at the sides and prepare for the next attack! Don’t step out of formation heedlessly — preserve your essence! Duke Huguenot, please stay down inside the carriage!” The commanding officer of Duke Huguenot’s knights, Raymond, gave his orders from behind the line with a strained voice.

“You can leave the front carriage’s protection to us!” Aria yelled towards Raymond.

“...Understood! It’s entrusted to you, Aria!” Raymond agreed shamefully. There was a delicate pause before he had responded — although they had definitely discussed the division of roles in an emergency before departure, his pride as a knight felt a sense of objection at relying on women. The rain of stones paused temporarily, when the situation suddenly changed —

“Monsters on the road to the rear!”

“To the front as well!”

From the forest off to the sides, goblins and orcs swarmed onto the road before and after Liselotte's party in a pincer attack. Their numbers were absolutely overwhelming.

"No way... One hundred, two hundred, three? Just how many are there...?" Cosette's face stiffened.

"...Can monsters plan such an organized attack?" Natalie was also dumbfounded as she looked at the monsters spreading out before them.

"M-Monsters have appeared from the forests to the side!" Chloe yelled in a high-pitched voice.

Aria thought for a few quick seconds before speaking up. "...Lady Liselotte, this is an emergency. We will need to take down the magic wall in order to preserve essence against this extreme number of monsters. Please remain crouched down inside the carriage and do not step outside. The carriage walls should protect you from stones, at least."

Liselotte's reply came from within the carriage immediately. "Okay, got it!"

Aria looked at the attendants and relayed them a plan she had come up with on the spot. "You girls leave the defense to the knights and take out the monsters approaching the carriage from the sides — even if it kills you. I will handle the enemies up front. After I've launched my attack, release the barrier and begin your attack. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the attendants all agreed together. Aria nodded in return, then looked at the knights on the sides.

"Knights at the sides, I leave the defense of the carriage to you. Leave the offense to us!" she yelled. The knights that had been frozen at the countless monsters swarming before them all trembled with a flinch. Their faces seemed to be questioning what a simple waiting attendant could do, when Aria drew her sword from the sheath at her waist with her right hand. At the same time, she held her left hand out and chanted a spell,

"Magicae Displodo."



A large magic circle spanning several meters immediately appeared before Aria. Light from the magic circle gathered in Aria's hand and, after a beat, a thick beam of essence shot forward. The monsters that were closing in from the front were instantly blown away.

"Wha..." Seeing that spectacle left some of the knights gaping in surprise — Aria had just used a higher middle-grade offensive magic.

It consumed much more essence compared to what it took to learn, but it had a weakness in how it was difficult to cast, and took time to activate depending on the user's ability. However, its power was guaranteed. The knights had been surprised at how an attendant had been able to acquire such a powerful magic, and that Aria's activation time was fairly short. But they only had a brief moment to be surprised, as in the very next moment, Aria suddenly disappeared.

Without the use of *Augendae Corporis*, Aria closed in on the monsters at an inhuman speed. The secret to her speed lay in the enchanted sword she wielded — an ancient artifact class of enchanted sword, to be precise. The enchanted blade Aria held glowed faintly along the blade where a formula had been carved in, granting the wielder the effects of a physical enhancement sorcery.

"Gwah?" The head of one of the monsters closing in on the front of their formation went flying. Two, three, four, and five heads went flying one after another in rapid succession.

The monsters didn't seem to realize their heads were being cut off, each severed head wearing a curious expression. However, once that head fell to the floor and gazed upon the sight of their detached body standing before them, they realized the truth. One beat later, the body of the monsters that had been beheaded would snap and collapse. In the blink of an eye, they turned to dust, leaving nothing but an enchanted gem behind.

Meanwhile, Cosette watched Aria's battle from beside the carriage.

"That's the Reaper Princess for you. So reliable," she said with a smile on her face, voicing Aria's other nickname.

Natalie looked at Cosette in exasperation. "...Damned fool. It'd be *your* head flying if she heard you."

"Ahaha. It's fine, it's fine. At this distance, she can't..." Cosette laughed lightly. However, from where she was fighting several meters away, Aria met her eyes for an instant, making her freeze.

"S-She didn't hear me, right?" Cosette said with a twitch.

Natalie shook her head bluntly. "Dunno. More importantly, we should follow our orders and start fighting, too," she said, looking between the forest on the left and the right. The monsters to the sides had also been distracted by Aria's fighting prowess, but they were slowly returning to the task at hand, raising their voices as they glared at the knights.

"...Right. Grace!" Cosette nodded with a sigh, calling the name of another attendant nearby.

"What?!" Grace replied with a grim look.

"Natalie, Chloe, and I will handle the monsters on the right. The four of you take care of the monsters on the left. You'll be in charge of that side."

"Understood. Here we go! *Augendae Corporis!*" Cosette said. Grace immediately followed suit, chanting the magic spell to enhance her physical abilities. The other attendants successively chanted the spell, too; once they did, magic circles appeared around their bodies, revolving in circles as they enveloped their bodies and activated magic to enhance the caster's physical abilities. Grace and the other attendants ran off — Once Cosette confirmed that, she turned to issue orders to the trainee attendant.

"Chloe, you stay alert of the front while using *Photon Projectilis* to take out the small fry from behind the knights on the right side. If you see any monsters throwing stones, prioritize aiming for them first. Start from the enemies at the edge, so you don't accidentally hit any allies, okay?"

"Okay!" Chloe responded with a stiff voice.

"Now, shall we get going, Natalie?" Cosette readied her halberd and smiled devilishly. Natalie held her two daggers and nodded,

“Yes, I’m ready to go whenever.”

“*Augendae Corporis—*” Cosette and Natalie chanted in unison.

After the magic circle rose and enhanced their abilities, the two of them immediately ran towards the forest.



As the hectic battle unfolded below, Reiss was overlooking the state of the fight from where he floated high above.

There’s one... rather incredible woman present. Liselotte Cretia’s confidant, I assume. Goodness, if this isn’t one tough guard. If I don’t approach this carefully, she might just defeat me... What a bad matchup.

Reiss looked down at Aria with his sharp eyes; she was overwhelming the monsters. At this rate, she would exterminate all the monsters coming from the front all by herself.

The guard on the left and right is also tough. While they’re not as notable as the woman in front, Liselotte Cretia’s subordinates are all talented. Thanks to their work, the flustered knights to the sides have also calmed down and started reacting properly. It seems like they’ve completely regained any advantage we had of our surprise attack.

Most of the knights were lined up along the side with their shields up, creating a barricade as though they were on high alert for a surprise attack from the side. On top of that, Liselotte’s proud attendants were massacring monsters quite far forward, so taking down that barricade would be no easy feat.

But there are still weak points. Where to aim... Reiss thought, looking at the rear of the formation.

There, the commanding officer, Raymond, was leading several other knights to stop the progression of the monsters. They were using *Photon Projectilis* to take out the numerous small-sized goblins and only making contact with the larger-sized orcs to repel them. Compared to the front of the formation, it would be easier to take down this side.

The girl at the front is eliminating the monsters at a much faster rate than

expected. It seems the goblins and the orcs don't stand a chance. Although, that depends on how they're used... Reiss groaned quietly, looking at Aria once more.

Princess Flora and Liselotte Cretia are inside a carriage, though I don't know which of the two, and it should be safe to assume the hero is riding alongside them, too. Although, there are no signs of him stepping forward for now... He thought deeply, looking down at the two carriages lined below his eyes.

For now, I'll have the projectile squad focus their aim on the second carriage and send reinforcements to the sides. If he really refuses to show up, then I'll simply pierce through the carriage from here. Reiss chuckled pleasantly to himself.



Meanwhile, inside the carriage where Liselotte and the others were hiding, Hiroaki was sitting on the floor of the carriage with his knees to his chest, tapping a leg restlessly.

“Oi, what’s going on outside? Is everything all right?” It was the umpteenth time he was asking the three girls that question.

“It’s fine. My attendants outside are the elite of the elite, especially Aria. And all of the knights of Duke Huguenot’s faction are there, too.” Liselotte nodded firmly in a calm tone, easing Hiroaki’s excitement at what was his first real combat experience.

“...Ah, but... like... Are the roads of this world really so dangerous? It’s been a while since the attack started and there are so many people out there, so how come the battle hasn’t ended yet?” Hiroaki objected gruffly, looking around the carriage somewhat nervously.

His fears stemmed from the fact that even now, at this moment, loud orders and angry yelling were still being exchanged outside. The fact that the number of stones hitting the carriage had increased wasn’t reassuring, either.

“Hero, let us believe in those outside,” Flora said.

“Unfortunately, the situation is like this right now. Those outside still haven’t explained what’s going on to us, and I’m not about to believe some people I

don't even know. Anyone who does is an idiot. Who would take responsibility for this?" Hiroaki had completely lost his cool, raising his voice in irritation. The girls around him were worried, too, but he seemed to be the only one who considered himself a victim, demanding someone take blame for their current state.

"...Okay," Flora hung her head dejectedly.

The ones attacking us are monsters... I'd much prefer if he went outside and yelled his abuse at them instead. He's just saying what he wants right now. After all that talk about protecting us, when it comes to the real thing he turns like this? What happened to your pride, the Yamata no Orochi? Geez! Liselotte wanted to rant at Hiroaki, but instead let out a small exasperated sigh. She then reached out and squeezed Flora's hand.

"Huh?" Flora looked up in surprise at Liselotte's face.

"Forgive me. Embarrassing as it is to admit, I'm a little afraid. Could I please hold your hand for a little while, Princess Flora?" Liselotte said, smiling gently at Flora.

"...Yes!" Flora nodded in relief. Seeing the two girls' frail exchange finally made Hiroaki realize something.

"Ah, you must be scared, too, Roanna. Don't worry... If it comes down to it, I'll release my Yamata no Orochi and protect you." Hiroaki held Roanna's hand rather guiltily.

"I knew I could count on you," Roanna said, leaning on Hiroaki.

After that, a silence fell over the carriage for a while. However, unable to endure the silence, Hiroaki opened his mouth.

"...But with the outside situation as chaotic as it is, having no idea of what's going on isn't very good. What is the commanding officer thinking?"

"I completely agree. Once the battle has ended, I shall make a report to the commanding officer," Roanna said without missing a beat.

"Good, that — Whoa! That was a big one just now." Hiroaki nodded, when a stone hit the carriage with a clang. That seemed to reignite Hiroaki's concerns.

“...Oi oi, this carriage might be covered in a layer of steel, but isn’t the higher elevation making it easier to aim for?” he muttered in frustration.

“It’ll be okay. Mere stones wouldn’t be able to pierce the walls of this carriage,” Flora said encouragingly, but —

“But doesn’t that mean if something more than a stone comes flying, we’ll be in trouble? Do you have proof that won’t happen? We should act in preparation for the worst. I think it’s too risky remaining in one place when we our communications with the outside have been cut off.” Hiroaki’s thoughts had completely taken a negative turn. On top of that, he was no longer calm.

Good grief, what a bothersome personality he has. Liselotte furrowed her brow in vexation. Preparing for the worst case in an emergency wasn’t a bad thing in itself, but becoming aggressive and forcing your emotions on your surroundings was horrible.

No matter how many opposite opinions were offered, a hot tempered person like him would not be likely to lend an ear to any of it. If anything, he’d just get more stubborn and heated about it.

Just then — *Ba-doom!* A particularly loud impact struck the roof of the carriage, shaking it greatly. “Whoa!”

“Kyah!” Hiroaki and Flora couldn’t hold back their screams. Liselotte hurriedly held Flora close to her to protect her, when she suddenly looked up.

W-What?!

The steel plated ceiling had a huge dent in the middle.

“Wha... What fell on us just now?! There better not be a monster above us!” Hiroaki’s eyes widened in shock as he wailed.

“I don’t know!” Liselotte finally cried out, at a loss.

There’s no helping it... I’ll go outside and find out what happened. It would normally be unthinkable for the subject of an escort to voluntarily step out into the battlefield, but this emergency surpassed that custom.

However, just as Liselotte resolved herself, Hiroaki’s patience reached its limit. “Kuh! E-Enough already! I can’t stay in here any longer without knowing

what's going on outside! We're going outside, you guys!"

He materialized the Divine Arms, Yamata no Orochi, inside the cramped carriage. Hiroaki gripped it tightly as he took Roanna by the hand and flung open the door.

"S-Sir Hiroaki?! Please hold on!" Roanna admonished him, but he didn't listen. He jumped out of the carriage, leaving Liselotte and Flora behind.

"Hero?! Argh, how troublesome! Geez!" Liselotte frowned in annoyance as she stood up. Flora had lost her composure in her confusion.

"U-Umm, what should we do?! We have to follow the hero!"

"...We're going to check on what's happening outside. Make sure you do not leave my side." Liselotte hesitated for a second before taking Flora's hand and helping her up. She had considered leaving her inside the carriage, but it could create more of an issue if they were split up.

"O-Okay!"

Chapter 8: Dilemma

Liselotte stepped out of the carriage after Hiroaki and Flora and immediately chanted a spell to block the throwing stones. *"Magicae Murum."*

Then, she looked around herself fearfully. It was, in a word, a battlefield. They were surrounded by an overwhelming number of monsters in all directions, and the knights were putting themselves on the line to block their approach.

What... is this? Are you telling me that this many monsters were lurking in the forest...? Liselotte's eyes widened with shock, but she soon snapped back to her senses with a gasp.

"Princess Flora, this way. Keep yourself low to the ground." She pulled Flora by the hand and led her out of the carriage. At the same time, she looked up in the air, but there were no monsters to launch an attack from above.

"O-Okay," Flora said in a scared manner, stepping down from the carriage.

Liselotte kept her posture low as she held her magic barrier over her head, searching for the sight of Hiroaki and Roanna nearby. *The hero is... Over there!* She quickly spotted the two of them crouched right next to the carriage. Roanna had a magic barrier up, protecting them from the stones.

Hiroaki spotted Liselotte and Flora and called out to them with a fearful face. "H-Hey! You guys came out too!" However, the commotion around them was so noisy, it drowned him out.

Once Liselotte had gotten close enough to Hiroaki, she let out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to see you safe." Even if he was annoying, it'd be a problem if he died.

"Safe... What part of this makes you think I'm safe?! Can we even win?!" Exposed to the chaotic air of the battleground, Hiroaki had completely lost his wits.

Repulsive monsters that had shapes similar to humans were trying to kill them. Their eyes were filled with madness as they looked upon him, roaring as they closed in.

On the other hand, the eyes of the knights engaging the monsters weren't normal, either. They glared at the monsters with clear murderous intent and were yelling at the tops of their lungs.

"...As amateurs, as people who are being protected, that isn't for us to decide. However, as far as I can see, our battle formation has settled nicely, so let's pray that they will be able to hold out." Liselotte didn't say anything to unnecessarily raise their hopes.

"Oi oi, what is this? Just what is this crazy-ass world? The hero with the godly weapon should be the one to fight triumphantly in his first battle. Nobody wants to see such an unfavorable outcome," Hiroaki began to mutter to himself. Even if he had a power that set him aside from normal people as a hero, he had completely lost in mentality. For a human that was complacent with peace, who had never killed an animal, much less a human, this wasn't the stage for him to fight triumphantly. Hiroaki acutely lacked the resolution and desperation.

Liselotte took a short breath and addressed Roanna. She no longer had the time to deal with Hiroaki. "Lady Roanna, Princess Flora. Could you go inside of the barrier, please? I must go tend to the wounded with magic."

"...Of course. I am forever grateful for your assistance." Roanna bowed her head deeply with a shameful expression. All of those who had fallen were knights of the Kingdom of Beltrum, which must have been weighing on her mind.

"I shall see you later, then." With those words, Liselotte made to leave.

"O-Oi, wait, Liselotte! Where are you going?! It's dangerous!" Hiroaki snapped back to his senses and called out to Liselotte.

"Just over there. I am going to aid the wounded," Liselotte replied without turning back, continuing to move as she had been.

"Don't! Come back! What happens if you get caught up in something dangerous, too?! That's what always happens for dramatic twists in stories! Damn it!" Hiroaki yelled after her, but Liselotte did not stop. She made her way to a wounded knight lying behind the row of shields braced on the sides.

“Are you okay? Can you hear me?” she asked him, checking to see if he was conscious.

“Ugh...” The knight didn’t give a clear response — it seemed as though one of the initial stones had hit him in the head. He was weary from the amount of bloodshed.

It doesn’t look like he’ll be able to rejoin the battle even after I heal him. I must hurry... There was another knight that was severely wounded, unable to move with a broken leg. That one was conscious, so this one was the higher priority.

Liselotte chanted the spell and began to heal him. “*Cura.*” She placed her hand over the wound and a magic circle appeared, emitting healing light. As she continued healing, Aria passed by, eyes wide.

“My Lady! Why are you here?!”

The sight of her standing there, holding a sword and without a single smudge on her uniform, made her stand out the most. And yet, it suited her perfectly; there was no one more reliable than Liselotte.

“Treating the wounded. Something really heavy fell from above and dented the roof of the carriage. But more importantly, what’s the current situation?”

Aria looked like she wanted to say something else, but sighed as she explained instead. “...The defense on the sides and rear is being driven back. I’ve cleaned up most of the monsters at the front, so I’m leaving the rest to the other girls and heading round back to support them there.”

“I see. Go and clean it up quickly, then. I’m counting on you,” Liselotte said, smiling innocently.

Aria’s mouth twitched with a smile as she let out a huff of laughter. “...Understood. I will return shortly.” She bowed before heading off at a near inhuman speed, going straight for the struggling rear of the formation.

All right, I have to do what I can too... Liselotte fired herself up once more and kept up her healing efforts.



Meanwhile, in the skies above, Reiss was observing the battlefield. “Fufu, so

she stepped around to the back.”

So far, everything that had taken place until now was exactly as he wanted. Once he confirmed that Aria had gone to support the rear of the party, he descended into the forest.

“Now, it’s time for me to bring out my secret weapon.” Reiss’ mouth twisted into a devil-like sneer.



Aria ran to the rear of the party to support Raymond in cleaning up the monsters there. With Aria stepping forward ahead of the others, the defense line was instantly improved.

“How awe-inspiring...” Raymond found himself captivated by the sight of Aria swinging her sword in the front line.

She lightly evaded the attacks of the monsters coming at her from every direction and meticulously sliced off their heads. Her movements were like that of a graceful petal fluttering in the wind, but the number of monsters was decreasing at a fearsome rate.

“Is that the power of the enchanted sword? No, that’s her own power...” Raymond felt conflicted. The fragile woman who was several years younger than him and who he was meant to be escorting Liselotte was stronger than anyone else present.

She’s nothing like the little girl I used to know. I did hear that her swordcraft had excellent results in the academy, but... She’s an actual genius.

He had never imagined she’d be this good. In the time it took Raymond to take out on orc, Aria would have eliminated nearly ten goblins and orcs.

She may even be fitting to be the King’s Sword. Raymond was certain of it.

Aria moved back to speak to Raymond plainly. “With this number of monsters, I should be able to handle this side by myself as well. Could you go around to the front and sides to assist them?”

“This side as well...? But, well... I see...” Raymond gulped in shock but soon understood the circumstances — Aria had probably eliminated the monsters to

the front by herself as well. However, his pride as a knight felt ashamed at relying on a woman in this situation, so he was at a loss for how to respond.

“Is something the matter?” Aria asked, her tone no different to an everyday conversation.

“No... You’re right. I’ll leave this...” Conflicted, Raymond was about to nod, when —

“GRAAAARGH!” Several terrible roars echoed about their surroundings.

“What was that?! Wha...” Raymond looked towards the direction of the roar in a panic, then was rendered speechless with shock. On the road at the rear of their party, towering behind the approaching monsters, were grotesque monsters that were humanoid in shape yet quite clearly not human. The strange looking monsters were called revenants. Previously, when Rio lived in the stone house in the outskirts of Amande, these unidentified monsters had been drawn to the magic essence of his barrier and attacked.

“W-Was that always there? Is that a monster too?!” Raymond yelled. Other monsters were also swarming out of the woods.

“I don’t know. One, two, three... a dozen in total, I see.” Aria counted the number of revenants calmly. Three were black and nine were gray.

It may be best to assume the difference in colors means something. My Lady is... no, the other attendants can tend to her. It would be bad if I left my position and allowed them to pass here. I’m not sure how strong they are, but I must finish them off as quickly as possible.

Aria hesitated when she thought about Liselotte, but she soon resolved herself to her self-assigned role. “There is no difference in what we must do. I assume the newly appeared humanoid monsters are enemies, so I will move to deal with them. If it seems like I can handle them alone, then everyone may move to support the others.” With that, she rushed forth into the fray once more.

“MROOOOH!” This time, an even greater roar came from the forest, making Aria freeze in her steps. The sound waves reverberated through the air, loud enough to shake the trees.

“...What now?” Aria sighed, irritated. The ground immediately rumbled with a *thump, thump, thump*.

“MROOOOH!” Behind the revenants on the road and from the forests to the side, three giant minotaurs with jet black bull heads appeared.

“Wha...” Their large bodies wielded stone greatswords, rendering everyone speechless.

“...Nothing about our approach changes.” Aria ran towards their new enemies before anyone else.



Meanwhile, Liselotte was able to hear the yells of the revenants from within the middle of the formation. After she heard the roars of the minotaurs, she trembled as she witnessed their ferocious appearance from the forest.

You’ve got to be kidding me... Liselotte froze in the middle of healing a wounded knight — her gaze was locked on the minotaur towering over the front of their party formation. Its body was over four meters tall, making it easy to see even from Liselotte’s position at the center of the formation. For a savage monster of that enormous size to be lurking so close to Amande — along with a swarm of so many monsters — was a situation she had never even imagined.

“I-Isn’t that... the same thing from back then...?!” Roanna said beside Liselotte.

“Lady Roanna, do you know that monster?!” Liselotte shouted.

“I-It’s a minotaur! A legendary monster that wrecked havoc during the Divine War!” Roanna screamed in reply, her voice filled with fear. Beside her, Hiroaki was silent with shock, whereas Flora was shaking heavily.

Their reactions weren’t surprising; Flora and Roanna had once been attacked and chased by the same monster when they were in the Academy, an experience that had been traumatic for their younger selves. At the time, they hadn’t stood a chance as students going against the monster, but they couldn’t win as adults, either.

For the calm and composed Lady Roanna to be so shaken... It must be bad.

Liselotte's heart thudded violently in her chest like someone had grabbed it and squeezed. Honestly, she wanted to flee as fast as she could, but there was nowhere to run.

"Oi oi, it's over..." Hiroaki muttered.

"Kyaaaah?!" The earth rumbled fiercely from very close range to Liselotte and the others, blowing sand into the air with wind pressure. Flora couldn't hold back her scream. When she opened her eyes a bit, a new minotaur stood before them.

"Wha... Where did it..."

It leapt out of the forest to the side of the road and soared over the heads of the knights with their shields braced, landing next to the carriage Liselotte and the others had been on — right in the middle of the formation. A stone greatsword was clutched in its hand.

"Ha... Haha... There's more there." Hiroaki's knees gave out as he pointed at the road in front of their formation. There were two minotaurs holding similar swords; that brought the total to four.

"Hrrgh." The minotaur right beside them looked down at Liselotte and the others and gave a repulsive sneer.

Flora and Roanna let out a scared "Eek," their voices barely audible. The knights on the side turned to face inwards from the road, holding their shields up fearfully.

"..." Liselotte stirred slightly, then gulped. It was commendable how she didn't scream.

The minotaur before her raised its stone sword with great strength. "O-Oh no..." It slashed its greatsword once, diagonally from bottom right to upper left, sending the carriage Liselotte's group had been on flying off into the forest, along with the horse.

Fortunately, the swing missed Hiroaki and the others, leaving them unscathed. Part of the carriage splintered off and flew into the shielded knights, sending bodies flying.

“Guh...” The defense line that was painstakingly constructed crumbled to pieces. In the forest, the attendants were still fighting with the monsters.

“Gufuhuh... Fuh?!” The minotaur laughed heartily, this time swinging its sword vertically upwards. But then, as though in fear of something, it froze on the spot. After a moment, it sluggishly drew its opposite hand out, reaching for Liselotte.

“N-No...” Liselotte wanted to dive to the side at once, but her legs had given out and her body was momentarily paralyzed, unable to move.

“Lady Liselotte?!” Attendants worried for Liselotte’s safety called out to her from the forests to the side. However, at some point, the revenants had joined the swarms of monsters at the side forests, attacking the girls.

“Lady Liselotte!” This time, another young girl’s voice rang out — it was Chloe’s. Thanks to her position towards the inside of the road, she had gotten away from being attacked by the revenants. Chloe leaped to catch Liselotte’s body and avoided the minotaur’s hand closing in at the very last minute.

“Kyah! Chloe?!” Liselotte screamed as they hit the ground rolling.

“A-Are you all right, Lady Liselotte?!” Chloe called out to her.

“Yes, th-thanks... I’m fine, but...” The danger hadn’t been resolved yet. The minotaur pulled back the arm that had swung and missed, this time reaching to grab Chloe and Liselotte instead. Its movement was faster and rougher than before, possibly out of irritation at being foiled once.

“!” Chloe clung to Liselotte desperately in an attempt to protect her master. However, the minotaur’s evil grasp was closing in nearer by the second. Liselotte and Chloe’s expressions both froze.

This was the end. Everyone was in agony, until... “...?!” A gust of wind blasted past Liselotte, almost as though a jet black flash had passed by.

Immediately after, that black flash charged straight into the minotaur’s gigantic body with a tremendous noise of impact. No sooner had that happened than the minotaur’s stone sword wielding right hand was detached. Severed.

The black flash had sliced it off.

With no strength remaining in the minotaur's grip, the stone sword was sent flying high through the air.

"MROOH...?!" The black flash's astoundingly fast movement came to a screeching halt by kicking the minotaur's body as a brake. He leapt into the air, twisting his body to catch the minotaur's greatsword as it soared through the air. Liselotte's heart, meanwhile, was captivated by the beautiful series of movements.

There, in the air, was a gray-haired boy clad in a pitch-black coat. He looked to be around Liselotte's age.

"Grugh...?" The minotaur was unable to process what had happened, stumbling heavily backwards, then collapsing onto its back, facing upwards.

"Hah!" The gray-haired boy in the jet black coat swung the stone sword he had grabbed downwards, sending it hurtling towards the minotaur at an incredible speed.

The thick stone sword easily pierced through the body of its original owner. "AARH, GARRGH?!" The minotaur lay skewered into the ground, roaring in agony.

One beat later, the boy landed smoothly on the handle of the stone sword. In his right hand was a valuable sword embedded with beautiful jade gemstones.

Liselotte gazed up at that boy in a daze.

"Allow me to assist," the gray-haired boy said in a youthful voice fitting for his age.



Interlude: Meanwhile, the Hero and Mastermind...

Shortly before the minotaur and revenants appeared, Rio, Aishia, and Celia were flying above the forest, on their way to Amande, when Aishia pointed in the direction they were heading.

“Haruto, there’s a big battle happening over there,” Aishia said, pointing in the direction they were heading towards. Rio immediately focused his eyes where Aishia was pointing and nodded.

“...So it seems. Ode is blowing about all over the place in that area.”

Carried in Rio’s arms, Celia pouted and strained her eyes too, but was unable to perceive the essence. “I can’t see anything...”

“One of the groups fighting are monsters.” Aishia noted.

“How can you tell?” Rio asked.

“It’s different from spirits. Monsters have their own unique presence that they emit. I don’t like it. I can feel a lot of monster auras in that area,” Aishia explained.

“I see. So the ones being attacked are people?”

“Probably.”

Rio thought for a moment. “...Let’s check out what’s going on. It’s pretty disturbing that it’s happening this close to Amande.”

“Okay,” Aishia nodded, before the three of them flew closer to the battle from above.

Rio observed the scene unfolding below him. “Knights? It looks like a noble party is being attacked. They’re surrounded by a tremendous number of monsters...”

“*Augendae Corporis*. ...Wow, there really is a lot of them. Will they be okay?” Celia asked.

“A swarm of goblins and orcs... They’re outnumbered, but they do look like they’ll be able to hold out. It doesn’t seem like there are any deaths, either...”
But they still shouldn’t let their guard down, Rio thought.

Knights that had their physical abilities enchanted by magic shouldn’t be taken down by any individual goblin or orc, but with this many numbers, the fight could get messy.

“There’s someone really strong there, too,” Aishia said, pointing out a woman on the road who had pushed particularly far into the enemy lines. It was Aria.

“...You’re right. Maybe she’s using an ancient artifact containing a powerful body-enhancing sorcery?” Rio’s eyes widened, looking at Aria.

Aria was gracefully and indifferently dropping the heads of the monsters one after another. Raymond and the others were watching her from a little further back in dumbfounded amazement.

“Do you mean that woman fighting at the front of the road?” Celia asked, straining her eyes harder. *Augendae Corporis* didn’t enhance vision as much as Rio and Aishia’s spirit arts could, so she couldn’t see the fighters all that well.

“That’s the uniform attendants and waiting maids wear, right?” Celia doubted her eyes at the sight of the woman in an attendant’s uniform, fighting monsters.

“Yes,” Rio nodded with a faint smile, when Celia’s eyes suddenly widened.

“Wait... Huh?”

“Is something the matter?” Rio asked Celia curiously.

“Ah, no... She just looked like my friend... Aria...?” Celia tilted her head in doubt.

“Your friend is down there?” Rio asked in surprise.

“Y-Yeah. That woman wearing the attendant clothes and swinging the sword — she’s a friend of mine that serves the Ricca Guild, or rather, Duke Cretia’s daughter, I think. I couldn’t see clearly, though...” Celia nodded in confusion.

“Your friend who serves Duke Cretia’s daughter...” Which meant that the master she served could also be within that group of people, Rio thought. If so,

it made sense for there to be so many knights escorting her.

Which makes her master Liselotte Cretia... Rio surmised.

“Haruto, something’s weird. Those are the same monsters that attacked us before,” Aishia said, pointing at the swarm of monsters Aria was fighting. There was a cluster of revenants.

“...You’re right. Those are strong... Will she be okay?” Combat skills aside, their incredible sturdiness and physical abilities meant that even a magic-enhanced knight would have trouble taking one down.

“There are several more strong monsters in the woods too,” Aishia said with a strangely stern voice.

“MROOOH!” The roar of the minotaur echoed all the way up to the sky as it leaped out onto the road.

“That’s... That’s here too?” Rio’s eyes widened greatly.

“H-Hey, is that...?” Celia asked Rio worriedly.

“The monster I defeated after it attacked us during the outdoor drill while I was at the Academy.”

“That’s a minotaur, right...? Ah, Aria!” Celia cried out; Aria had started running towards the minotaur and group of revenants below.

“...Wow, she’s going against that swarm of monsters,” Rio muttered in awe. Aria was in the middle of a hard fight. She couldn’t eliminate them instantly like goblins and orcs and was forced to go on the defensive, making it hard for her to fight properly.

“Aria...” Celia looked down at Aria in frustration.

“Professor...” Rio glanced at Celia’s face uneasily. “Aishia,” he said, but Aishia was paying no attention to Rio’s voice, staring fixedly on the forest below instead.

“Aishia?”

“...Sorry, what was that?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It was just my imagination. What is it?” Aishia shook her head, but her words still bothered Rio a little.

“I have an idea, so I’m going to join the fight below. Can you take the Professor somewhere safe?” Rio asked.

Aishia hesitated for a moment before agreeing. “...Got it.”

Flustered, Celia spoke up with a conflicted expression. “Huh?! Ah, no, you can’t! It’s dangerous!” Her feelings of hoping that Rio could save her friend and reluctance to let Rio head into danger were causing quite a conflict in Celia’s heart.

“Professor, your friend is struggling down there...”

“Another one,” Aishia’s voice said sharply. Her gaze was locked on the new minotaur that had landed right in the middle of the party’s formation.

“That looks bad. I need to hurry — I’m counting on you, Aishia!” With that, Rio rapidly descended to the ground.

Meanwhile, as Rio approached the battle —

Whoa, that was close. Phew. How unlike me to nearly slip up like that... Reiss lurked in the forest, concealing his presence. Covered by the trees of the forest, he couldn’t see the skies above, but his awareness was turned far overhead.

While I may have noticed belatedly, I somehow managed to finish sending out the pawns. I should refrain from using my powers anymore from here on out. Otherwise, someone will notice me. A cold sweat ran down his back.

However, this spirit aura... Does it really mean what I think it means? And after I finally came so far, too. What an unfortunate series of events. Now, let’s see how things turn out... His face, hidden under the cloak, carried a rare expression of thought. He pondered worriedly.

Chapter 9: A Heroic Tale

No sooner than Rio had arrived to help had he taken down one of the minotaurs. “Allow me to assist,” he said to Liselotte. The dead minotaur dissolved into ash, leaving behind the greatsword and spirit stone as it vanished without a trace. Rio jumped down from the sword handle he was using as a foothold and gently landed beside Liselotte.

“Eh? Ah...” Liselotte looked up at Rio after he landed before her, speechless. She knew she should be saying something, but she couldn’t seem to find her words. Chloe also gulped from where she was clinging to Liselotte as she looked up at Rio’s face.

“Lady Liselotte!” Cosette and Natalie came running. They had done away with the revenants chasing them as fast as possible to join their master.

“You’re...” Natalie said to Rio’s back as she supported Liselotte to her feet, when —

“MROOOOH!” One of the two minotaurs on the road before them roared to interrupt their conversation and started running. It used its momentum to leap high into the air, closing in directly to where Rio and the others stood.

“Wha—!” As their speed was unfitting for a body of that size, Liselotte and the attendants reacted late. But the minotaur was aiming for Rio.

“MROGH!” Its overwhelming mass accelerated its fall speed, swinging its stone sword downwards at Rio as it was about to land.

“Guh...?!” Liselotte and the other girls refrained from screaming, but the incoming impact made them reflexively turn their heads and cover their eyes. Then, after a moment, they opened them again fearfully.

“Grufugh,” The minotaur sneered with a triumphant smile. And yet —

“No... way... H-He’s still standing?” The girls, doubting their own eyes, all thought that the scene before them was impossible. In their field of vision, holding his sword up to block the stone sword and still standing on his two legs,

was Rio.

“MROOOGH?! M-MROOOHHH!” The minotaur’s gaze landed on Rio staring back up at it and widened its eyes. Immediately after it did, the madness drained from its eyes and was replaced with a brief look of fear, before it returned to madly striking its greatsword against Rio’s numerous times. An impact strong enough to upturn bedrock surged forth, making Liselotte and the others shriek.

“Kyah?!”

Rio silently continued to block the minotaur’s sword in order to protect the girls. After a while, the minotaur’s barrage of attacks stopped.

“Grufu...gh?!” The minotaur panted, looking down at the place where Rio had been. When it discovered Rio was still going strong with the same pace, the minotaur took a hurried step backwards.

“If you’re willing to back away on your own, then all the better,” Rio said, starting his pursuit of the retreating minotaur. He kicked off the ground with force, closing in on the minotaur in an instant.

“MROOOGH! MROOOGH!” The minotaur was desperate. It suddenly swung its sword downwards, its looming greatsword aimed for Rio’s body with precision. Rio moved to block the attack with his sword, but their difference in weight meant he was deflected into the ground. Rio, however, had expected that much to happen. Once he landed, he put more strength into his feet and leaped at the minotaur.

The minotaur roughly swung its sword once more. This time its arm moved horizontally, aiming to send Rio flying sideways into the forest with its precision. Rio braced his sword, and at the moment of impact — “MROOOGH?! ” The unexpected resistance left the minotaur in confusion.

Rio twisted his sword and body at a speed that matched the slash to avoid it cleanly. Then, he gracefully jumped on top of the blade that the minotaur was still swinging.

“No way!” The fearsome display of combat skills made Liselotte and the other girls gaze in amazement. In the very next moment, Rio completely cut through

the wrists of the minotaur holding the sword. The greatsword fell with a dramatic noise, piercing the earth.

Rio continued up the minotaur's right arm by speeding up and going for a neck slash, but — "Watch out!" Liselotte and the girls all yelled at once. Three black and gray revenants suddenly jumped out of the forests to the left and right, rushing to attack Rio. They came at him in a pincer attack, leaping high into the air.

Thankfully, Rio had already taken measures to counter the ambush from both sides at that point, pausing his business with the minotaur to deal with the revenants first.

These guys are fairly tough. To end them in one blow, I'd have to aim above the neck or for the heart...

Rio immediately determined his target and, without even a glance, swung his sword sideways at the closest approaching revenant on the right. Moments later, the black revenant that had been charging from the right had its head cleanly separated into the air. All that remained were the two gray revenants.

Rio led the two furiously attacking revenants on until the last moment, then suddenly pulled back and evaded the attack from both sides.

"Gruh?!"

The two revenants had built up too much momentum and collided with great force; Rio then sliced off the two revenants' heads.

Only seconds had passed since the ambush, but it was enough time for the minotaur with the dismembered right hand to stand back up.

"MROOH!" The minotaur picked its sword off the ground with its left hand, shaking Rio off its right arm and retreating. Rio landed on the ground and chased after the minotaur he failed to finish off earlier. He kicked off the ground and approached the minotaur from close to the ground.

"MROOOOOOOOH!" The minotaur swung haphazardly with all its strength at the ground where Rio was. However, Rio firmly placed his feet against the ground and deflected the minotaur's sword.

The weapons on both sides clashed together with tremendous speed. Each time the swords struck each other, a roaring sound echoed throughout; the sight of their battle was unimaginable even for this world.

It was almost like the fight of a hero from the legendary tales of the Divine War era.

“N-No way, he’s on par with a monster of that size...?!” Cosette shrieked, her voice in a near-scream out of shock.

“...No, that boy is winning by a mile. He’s pushing it back,” Natalie added in a trembling voice.

The scales of their give-and-take were clearly in Rio’s favor as he dominated over the minotaur and forced it back outside of the party’s formation.

Once it was outside, Liselotte’s expression flipped like a switch as she called out to the attendants near her. “T-This is our chance to reorganize ourselves! Chloe, bring the wounded within the formation! Natalie, Cosette, gather the uninjured knights and harden our defenses to the left and right sides! They’ve stopped attacking from the sides for now, but don’t let your guard down! You remaining girls, finish off the rest! Don’t worry about me!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” they all replied in unison, hurrying to their tasks.

“Princess Flora, great hero, Lady Roanna! Are you hurt anywhere?!” Liselotte ran over to Flora and the others with worry. The three of them were frozen stiff as they watched Rio’s fight with the minotaur.

“...Yes, I’m completely fine...” Flora confirmed in a daze, watching Rio’s form with a somewhat faraway look in her eyes. Her lips seemed to move to mouth the words “Just like back then,” but no one else had noticed.

“W-What... is that...?” Roanna muttered, utterly shellshocked.

“...” As for Hiroaki, he was rendered completely speechless.

“The three of you seem to be fine, I see. All that’s left is Duke Huguenot’s safety...” Liselotte sighed in relief. When she looked over at the rear carriage, she spotted Duke Huguenot, who had left his carriage at some point, standing stock still.

“...” Like Hiroaki, he was at a loss for words, captivated by the battle between Rio and the minotaur. However, that battle was mere moments from ending. The beheaded minotaur fell to its knees and collapsed powerlessly.

“Now the only minotaurs left are the one far down the road that way, and the one on the opposite direction that Aria just finished off! Looks like we’ll be in the clear,” Liselotte said, certain of their victory.

Out of the minotaurs that had appeared, two were on the road they were heading towards, one leaped into the middle of their formation, and the final one appeared behind them. Of these, Rio and Aria had already taken out three of them, leaving the final minotaur standing still on the road, in their way.

Aria was currently taking on the remaining revenants, slowly but surely defeating them one by one. It was only a matter of time until all of the enemies had been eliminated. But just then, the remaining minotaur raised its sword and let out a powerful roar.

“MRGROOOOOOGH!”

It glared at Rio standing on the road fixatedly. Tension rippled through the atmosphere.

“?!” Liselotte instinctively cowered. Beside her, Flora let out a quiet squeak and trembled with a flinch.

“It’ll be okay,” Liselotte said, hugging Flora’s body to herself gently.

“O-Okay. Thank you...” Flora said in relief, her strength draining.

However, led by several gray revenants, countless goblins and orcs poured out of the forests to their sides, all swarming to rush at Rio. “Graaagh!”

T-There are still more?! Liselotte thought, dumbfounded, but Rio took a large step backwards to counter the monsters’ ambush.

“MROOGH!” The minotaur started running forward at a speed that didn’t match its giant size. Even from afar, its intensity shook the earth.

“...!” Liselotte’s body stiffened a little. Her protective hold around Flora strengthened. Flora squeezed Liselotte’s body in return as she watched as Rio fought off the incoming monsters.

“Gufuh.” The minotaur smiled pleasantly as it leapt high into the air. It jumped high enough to clear the monsters’ and Rio’s heads.

“It’s aiming for us?!” Liselotte gulped, realizing the aim of the minotaur. It was clearly aiming for their location. The other minotaur from earlier had also tried to grab her, she recalled.

“Gufufuh... Fuh?!” The minotaur had a triumphant smile on its face as it looked down at Rio below it. But when it noticed that Rio was looking back with a cold gaze, it flinched. In the next moment, it lost sight of Rio.

“Huh?” Liselotte and Flora said. Rio, who had been fighting monsters several meters away, was suddenly standing right beside them. The monsters were confused by Rio’s sudden disappearance, looking around for him.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be taken down on the next hit,” Rio said shortly, focusing essence into the dwarven sword in his hands before making a running leap at the minotaur. The valuable sword in his hand glowed with a bright light.

“...An enchanted sword,” Liselotte murmured in a daze. The sword in Rio’s hands blasted a tremendous torrent of wind out of its blade, which gathered into a violent whirlwind.

“MROH?!” When the minotaur noticed Rio’s approaching figure, it swung its sword in a panic. Rio held his sword up and at the ready.

“MROOOOOOOOOH!” The minotaur roared to give itself energy. The next blow would decide everything, which was something it probably realized. It mustered all the strength it could into its stone sword.

In the meantime, anyone who was still conscious had their eyes fixed to the battle. Their bodies shuddered and their hearts soared with elation as they watched the climax of the encounter.

When the two swords collided — *boom* — a roaring sound echoed. At the same time, a windstorm swept through. The minotaur’s stone sword crumbled into dust as Rio’s wind blast made a direct hit. Its enormous body was blown by the blast of wind, sending it hurtling towards the ground at an incredible speed. It mowed down all the monsters swarming on the road.

“Guah?”

The last thing the monsters saw was a giant black shadow closing in on them before they were crushed to death. Following the impressive impact and tremendous roar was a moment of silence. One beat later, Rio landed on the ground softly.

“Yeeahh!”

Cheers rose up. While some people were envious and others were observing calmly, in this moment, the majority of people present were filled with an excitement that was almost child-like.

The end of a battle of legend.

It was, quite simply, the moment a new heroic tale was born.



While the excitement still lingered on the scene, Aria provided her master with a report. “Lady Liselotte, the monsters are retreating into the forest. We should still keep our guards up, but for now the danger is deemed to have passed.”

Right behind her stood Natalie, Cosette, and several attendants. However, they all looked rather ashamed.

“We would like to sincerely apologize for our ineptitude at protecting my lady during this emergency. After the situation has been dealt with, we will accept whatever punishment is inflicted upon us.” They all bowed their heads at the same time.

“Oh no, what are you saying? You did your best during the worst situation possible. If anything, I’d like to give you a special reward, but right now we have to focus on healing the injured as quickly as possible. Now, disperse! Oh, except for Aria. I want to talk to that boy, so come with me.” Liselotte sighed tiredly and clapped her hands together, making the attendant women scatter. Then, she called Aria over and looked at Rio standing idly on the road.

“Understood.” Aria nodded respectfully.

“U-Umm! I will come along too!” Flora, who was leaning against Liselotte’s side, offered in a fluster as well. Liselotte hesitated for a moment.

“...Then, behind Aria,” Liselotte instructed. She wanted to speak to Rio right away.

Duke Huguenot approached. “I shall accompany you, too.”

Thus, the four of them made their way to Rio. Rio seemed to be carefully watching the surrounding forest, but when he noticed them approaching, he sheathed his sword and gave a well-mannered bow.

What a polite person he seems to be. A beautiful one too... but what are those features...? No, he seems to be raised well... Perhaps he’s a noble? But he doesn’t look familiar, and someone this strong should be famous... Liselotte gathered the thoughts of her first impression of him as she drew near enough to converse.

“Thank you very much for your assistance in our time of need. My name is Liselotte Cretia, the governor for the city of Amande nearby.” She grasped the hem of her skirt and curtsied gracefully as she spoke, introducing herself.

“...I’m Haruto. It was nothing.” Rio swallowed faintly when he spotted Flora’s face and hair beside her, but replied with his own short introduction and a bow.

“Sir Haruto, then...” Liselotte stiffened faintly when she heard Rio’s name, but she immediately readjusted her smile and introduced Flora and Duke Huguenot. “There are many things I would like to ask you, if possible, but allow me to first introduce these two. This here Her Highness, the Second Princess of Beltrum, Princess Flora. And the present head of the Huguenot family, Duke Gustav Huguenot.”

Usually, during introductions like this, the one with higher rank would step forth and make their greeting first, but Flora remained in a dazed silence. “...”

She wasn’t certain, but her eyes gazed straight at Rio’s appearance and recalled the traces of someone else she once knew.



Epilogue

Meanwhile, from within the forest, there was someone else observing the new heroic tale unfold.

Reiss.

“That’s some incredible strength. Well, if he’s contracted to a humanoid spirit, I suppose this much is to be expected...” Reiss felt dejected at the way things had turned out against his wishes.

He overturned my entire plan singlehandedly. Now the question is, is he Liselotte Cretia’s trump card, or Duke Huguenot’s... Either way, it is highly possible that he was the one who disrupted the wedding ceremony. What a terrifying hidden soldier. This is why humans are not to be underestimated.

He sighed at the unexpected circumstance, feeling disgruntled.

I cannot afford to adjust my plan, but I am most definitely lacking combat power now. I’ve lost half the monsters I originally prepared to attack Amande. Accepting the situation, he considered what his options were for the future.

It looks like some immediate backup power will be necessary. That being said, while a minotaur or revenant can take care of that attendant girl, they’d be no match against him. I cannot afford to lose the Evil Black Wyvern, too, and it’s difficult giving the monsters more complex directions. Which leaves Lucius... Reiss pondered and pondered, then selected a reinforcement that seemed most fitting.

“While there are slight issues with his personality, he can come deal with this.”

Afterword

Everyone, I have been in your care. This is Yuri Kitayama — Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Volume 6, Twilight Overture*.

So, Volume 6 is now on sale... It feels like time has really flown by since Volume 1 first went on sale one year and three months ago. This is all thanks to everyone who has shown their support from the beginning. I am most grateful to you all, from the bottom of my heart! Now that the story is moving towards the main plotline, the plot from here onwards has already been created. As the volumes increase, I have been discussing with Editor N how to make the events unfold in the most exciting way. Please look forward to the next volume, too.

That is all from me this time.

Finally, the *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* manga drawn by tenkla is currently being serialized for free on HJ Bunko's official homepage. Please check it out if you have the time!

— October 2016, Yuri Kitayama.

Bonus Short Stories

Elemental ☆ Teacher, Professor Celia! (Happy New Year Edition!)

Somewhere on Earth...

Celia Claire was a foreign teacher that had relocated to work as a substitute teacher in a Japanese high school.

However, it was January 1st — New Year's Day. High schools in Japan were all on break, so Celia decided to go and gain some cross-cultural experience by way of the Japanese New Year.

At present, she was waiting at a dry riverbed for two of her high school students to show up.

"Hey, Suzune. Are you sure I don't look weird?" she asked Endo Suzune, the primary school girl standing beside her. Suzune was also waiting for the two high school students who had yet to arrive.

"You're fine. Even my mom was talking about how good it looks on you!" Suzune gave her stamp of approval with wide, beaming grin.

"If you're sure, then..." Celia checked her outfit restlessly. She was currently wearing what would be considered the pride of Japan's traditional clothing — a long-sleeved kimono. On top of that, she held a hagoita with a cute design in her hand. Next to her, Suzune was also wearing a kimono and holding a hagoita of different designs.

The *hagoita* were wooden paddles to be used in a game of *hanetsuki* — similar to badminton — and they were about to meet up with the other two people to play it. Suzune's mother had highly recommended wearing kimono for hanetsuki, so they had spent a long time rummaging through the wardrobe before reaching this point.

"Ah! Haruto onii-chan, Miharu onee-chan!" When Suzune noticed the arrival

of the two people they were waiting for, she ran over to them energetically.

“Happy new year, Suzune. Be careful not to run in such pretty clothes,” Amakawa Haruto warned her with a faint smile. Beside him stood another high school student, Ayase Miharuru, who was smiling pleasantly at Suzune.

“H-heh! H-Happy New Year!” Suzune blushed as she bowed her head at Haruto. At that point, Celia had caught up to them.

“Happy New Year, Professor Celia. The kimono looks very pretty on you,” Haruto said in greeting.

“O-Oh, yeah. T-Thank you. And happy new year... You too, Miharuru.” Celia’s cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

“Happy New Year to you, Professor Celia, Suzune,” Miharuru returned the greeting with a graceful bow.

Incidentally, Haruto was in his casual clothes while Miharuru was dressed in a long-sleeved kimono, hagoita at the ready.

“You’re so beautiful, Miharuru... This must be what they call a Yamato Nadeshiko,” Celia said, completely captivated by Miharuru’s beauty. In reality, her glossy black hair and delicate aura made the perfect pair to the Japanese clothes.

“N-No, not at all. If anything, your white hair suits your kimono so well, you look like a beautiful illusion, Professor Celia,” Miharuru said in a high-pitched voice, blushed shyly.

“Ahaha, thank you. I’d like to believe that... and Suzune, you can snap out of it already!” Celia thanked her with a faint smile before she noticed Suzune acting strangely beside her.

“Ehe, ehehe, Haruto onii-chan called me pretty...” She was extremely pleased about being complimented by her beloved Haruto.

Celia sighed tiredly. “Geez...” But the corners of her mouth were twitching up in a smile.

Miharuru laughed in amusement. “Ahaha, shall we begin soon?”

“Yes, but I don’t know the rules of hanetsuki very well...”

“The rules are that there are basically no rules. You hit the shuttlecock towards another person and continue doing that until you stop. Do you want to try it with me first?”

“Yes, please.”

Thus, it was decided that Miharu and Celia would play first against each other.

“Okay. Suzune, how about we stand a little further back and observe them?”

Haruto took Suzune by the hand and urged her to move a short distance away.

“Fweh?! O-Okay!”

With a bright red face, Suzune agreed. And watching the two of them —

“Hmph...”

— were Miharu and Celia, both looking a little envious.

I’ll show you the maturity of an adult!

This is a story that occurred just after Rio and Aishia took Celia away from the capital of Beltrum.

“Shall we go, Aishia?”

“Yeah.”

Rio picked Celia up in a princess carry and rose into the air, gently, with his wind spirit arts.

“Ah...”

Celia felt the faint floating sensation and tightened her grip around Rio reflexively.

Seeing Rio all grown up, reliable and warmhearted, filled her with relief. Feeling it first-hand made Celia so happy, she squeezed her arms even more.

“Fufu,” Celia let out a giggle without realizing.

“Are you scared, Professor?” Rio asked, looking down at Celia’s face; he had noticed how Celia’s grip around him had strengthened. Their eyes met at a

nose-to-nose distance away from each other.

Celia couldn't help the flush that crept over her face. "...N-Nope, I'm not scared. Aishia carried me through the air earlier, so I'm used to the floaty feeling now," she replied, averting her gaze shyly.

Belatedly, she realized that being in a princess carry had put her at a much closer distance to Rio than she thought.

Very belatedly.

"That's good, then. If you're scared, just give me a heads up. I'll adjust my speed for you," Rio offered, tilting his head a little curiously.

"O-Okay." Celia nodded awkwardly.

I-I felt so elated when we were departing, I asked Rio to carry me for the flight... Would it have been more natural to ask Aishia instead? No, but Rio agreed so casually... I-It was natural, right? she thought to herself.

Her heart thudded louder and louder in her chest. When she peered up at Rio's face in wonder, she saw that he didn't seem to be as nervous — or rather, nervous at all — compared to her.

Maybe I'm thinking too much about it? Yes, this much is n-normal. Normal. That's right, I have to be carried all the way to the kingdom of Galarc, so this is necessary. There's nothing strange about it.

Celia pondered to herself as she watched Rio's expression carefully. That's right — since Aishia was the one to carry her out of the capital, now it was Rio's turn to do the carrying. That was the natural flow of things, wasn't it?

That's right. I'm clinging to him because it's necessary, so it would be weird if I acted really nervous about it. I'm Rio's teacher, so I must show him the maturity of an adult woman. I'll show him he's not the only one that's grown up!

Right. The reason why she was being held in a princess carry was because it was easier to move with. There was nothing weird about it. Celia's thoughts spiralled in a clearly childish way.

"...Professor, you seem a little restless. Are you scared after all?" Rio asked as he checked on Celia's expression.

“N-Not at all. I’m fine, I’m mature, I can handle this much. You can even go faster if you want!” Celia feigned composure as she replied. She made to loosen her hold around Rio too.

“Really? Then...” Rio said with amusement, raising his speed in a sudden burst of intensity.

“Hyahn!” The sound had escaped from Celia unconsciously. She threw her arms tightly around Rio in a panic.

“See, it’s dangerous. Make sure you hold on properly,” Rio chuckled, adjusting his hold on her.

As a result, they were even closer together than they were before. Celia buried her face into Rio’s neck and, after a pause, blushed bright red.

Celia scolded Rio in shock. “Y-You’re a bully, Rio! I’ll have you know that was a sound of surprise just now, not fear. Got it?!”

“Ahaha, sorry,” Rio apologized with a laugh.

Aishia nodded with satisfaction as she flew next to them. “Cute.”





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by Yuri Kitayama

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